

The Role of Nostalgia in Reality Television's Representation of Rural Lives

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the role of nostalgia in reality television's representation of rural lives. My study merges a theoretical and critical investigation. I take *Alaska: The Last Frontier* as my case study and argue that the programme responds to social change and urban living conditions in the United States by creating a nostalgic and idealistic representation of pre-industrial American life. While the text is largely reactionary and calls upon a restorative nostalgia that imagines ideal American life as rural, white and heteronormative, the show also exhibits elements of reflective nostalgia, using the Kilcher family's lifestyle to critique contemporary late capitalist lifestyles. Furthermore, I argue that this use of nostalgia conveys a dissatisfaction with post-industrial and urban life by foregrounding an idealistic settler narrative that implies it is not through progressive reform that America will find its nostrum but through a return to conservative values.

The chapters in this thesis examine aspects of contemporary urban life that have drastically changed since the onset of America's industrial revolution. My first chapter argues that nostalgia can manifest in an individual and potentially, a nation. I also argue that reality television plays a significant role in evoking nostalgia and uses it to respond to the sociological conditions of late capitalist urban life. Chapter 2 explores the relationship between the wilderness and nostalgia. In particular, I consider how the 'frontier myth' structures the show's nostalgic representation of rural living. In my third chapter I discuss how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* evokes nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship and community, reminiscent of a pre-industrial revolution American culture. This chapter also uses the condition of anomie to further understand how the seemingly disparate relationship between the urban setting in which the programme is largely consumed and the nostalgia for a sense of family and community that the programme evokes, relate. Chapter 4 argues that the representation of labour in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* constructs a 'fantasy of wholeness' and that this process potentially evokes nostalgia for an idealised set of labour relations that are perceived to be lost in the late capitalist age. I present a case study from *Alaska: The Last Frontier* to show how the programme constructs a 'fantasy of wholeness' through representing idealised labour relations that are in stark contrast to Marx's theory on how capitalist labour conditions are experienced. Finally, my fifth chapter reflects on the complex and integral role that nostalgia plays in *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of rural lives and discusses how the work I have presented in this thesis may provide a basis for future enquiries.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

REALITY TELEVISION AND NOSTALGIA

In the past decade reality television has provided a proliferation of shows that depict rural lives in Alaska. Programmes such as *Alaskan Bush People* (2014–), *Yukon Men* (2012–2016), *Mountain Men* (2012–), *Life Below Zero* (2013–), *Edge of Alaska* (2014–2017) and *Alaska: The Last Frontier* (2011–) are just a few of these programmes. These shows appear to celebrate isolated and extremely rural ways of life, placing emphasis on nature, self-reliance and ‘traditional’ approaches to labour and lifestyle. While these shows are shot in the present day and feature contemporary people, they often demonstrate a nostalgic desire for ‘simpler times’ and a return to the past. However, the past never existed in such an unproblematic way as these imaginings of the past. In these texts, America’s past is imagined as white, as governed by traditional Western patriarchal family structures, and as defined by Calvinist work ethic. I take *Alaska: The Last Frontier* as my case study, and in this dissertation consider the role of nostalgia in reality television’s representation of rural lives. I argue that the programme uses nostalgia to respond to the sociological conditions of late capitalist urban life by presenting a conservative and reactionary text that proffers an exclusionary narrative of American values based on conservative ideals. This use of nostalgia conveys a dissatisfaction with post-industrial and urban life. Furthermore, by foregrounding an idealistic settler narrative, the show implies that it is not through progressive reform that America will find its nostrum but through an appropriation of conservative values.

The impetus for this study emerged from my own personal engagements with *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. At first, I watched this programme from my kitchen as I cooked our evening meals, but eventually I arranged my routine so that I could sit down in front of the television and watch the entire programme undistracted. From my relatively small apartment situated in the suburbs of a large city, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* has taken me into the forests of Alaska on moose hunts, onto the Arctic Ocean to fish for Halibut, and into icy rivers to catch salmon. As winter has turned into spring on screen, I looked on as vegetable seedlings were planted and berries foraged. I also watched a portion of these food sources being preserved and stowed away, adding to large reserves. Characters have constructed log cabins, outhouses and

underground cellars before me without the convenience of a construction team or the latest machinery. Livestock have been slaughtered in front of my eyes and every bit of the carcass used; I watched beef fat made into soap and a cow skull given to a dog as a chew toy. At the same time, the characters have told me that they love the life they lead, and continuously reiterate their preference for living in a way that is significantly different from that of the majority of urban citizens, including my own life.

Despite the disparity between the radically rural content of the programme and my urban reality, I relished the opportunity to vicariously experience a more agrarian way of life and the palpable satisfaction that characters seem to derive from their daily practices and values. The Kilcher family that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is centred around and their endeavours to maintain a self-sufficient lifestyle in Alaska served as ideal subjects for feeding this fascination. In essence, I became captivated by images that carry a distinct reference to America's pre-industrialised era, and more specifically, the era of America's pioneers and frontiersmen. I became nostalgic for a time and space that does not require the practices and values of my present late capitalist urban reality and I noticed a longing to access the improved sense of personal wellbeing that the characters on *Alaska: The Last Frontier* seem to have obtained through their lifestyle.

A desire to theorise my own interest and pleasures has led me to move beyond anecdotal evidence and consider what rural television offers urban viewers. Just as *Alaska: The Last Frontier* allowed me a pastoral retreat from my urban life, I want to examine how the show's world operates as an alternative to urban, late capitalist life. The nostalgia I experienced also made me aware of how this televisual medium and reality genre facilitate the portrayal of a very specific depiction of rural life. This led me to explore a more widely applicable theorisation of nostalgia and reality television. My hypothesis is that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* responds to social change and urban living conditions in the United States by creating a nostalgic and idealistic representation of pre-industrial American life. While the text is largely reactionary and calls upon a restorative nostalgia that imagines ideal American life as rural, white and heteronormative, the show also exhibits elements of reflective nostalgia, using the Kilcher family's lifestyle to critique the conditions of contemporary late capitalism.

To address this hypothesis, I discuss America's frontier myth in relation to its exclusionary narrative. I consider how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* uses this mythology to build an idealised image of rural living that supports the reactionary message of the programme. This mythology preserves what is thought to be America's origin story and forms the basis of America's national identity. I therefore discuss American national identity in this light and interrogate the role nostalgia plays in constructing a national identity that proffers conservative ideals rooted in a bygone era. This leads me to show how the programme reflects a traditionalist vision of 'being American'. I also discuss questions of labour and the representation of the nuclear family and communities, exploring certain developments in the function and experience of these constructs in contemporary urban environments since the onset of modernity. I examine how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* subverts these experiences by presenting idealised images of labour practices, family relations and community interactions that are reminiscent of pre-industrial America, thereby conveying a dissatisfaction with the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation.

The starting point for my study is the observation that *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of everyday life is distinctly different to the experience of everyday life within America's prevailing urban environments. The United States Census Bureau conducted a study on the change in America's rural and urban population size between 1910 and 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2016). This study showed that in 1910 more than half (54.4%) of America's population lived in rural areas; in 2010, however, "only 1 in 5 of the total population (19.3%) lived in rural areas" (US Census Bureau, 2016). As of 2016, statistics show that 82.5% of the American population live in urban areas (Worldometers, 2016). Given the small percentage of America's population that is rural (and its continuous decline), it would be fair to say that a significant amount of the programme's viewers are urban and that the programme is designed not for the relatively small market of rural viewers but for the enormous market of urban Americans.

In the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, few rural people actually live the kind of rural lives represented onscreen and fewer still reproduce the 'pioneer' lifestyles featured on *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. This is a fading way of life that has been replaced by mechanised farming, imported crops, immigrant labour and an economy that is increasingly based on services rather than production. Thus, these onscreen representations of rural 'reality' are somewhat

contrived or intentionally constructed to fit a particular ideological trajectory. In this vein, Derek Moscato describes how Arctic-centric reality television shows “simultaneously romanticize and commodify the North American Arctic, transmitting images of frontier adventures, conflicts, and resource extraction activities into households across the continent and internationally” (2017, p. 2). These representations, Moscato identifies, transmit “powerful images and soundscapes of the region to millions of households across the continent and the world—yet at the same time they produce a specific form of media content arising from particular political, economic, and ecological worldviews and real conditions” (2017, p. 3). *Alaska: The Last Frontier* embodies this description of reality television but also provides a convincing example of how the genre uses nostalgia to romanticise and commodify the North American Arctic region. Moreover, nostalgia is used to convey the show’s political, economic and ecological message by proffering a more conservative and rural way of life. This use of nostalgia as a means of preserving the frontier myth and using this idealisation to convey a reactionary message interests me. What does the nostalgic performance of a pre-industrial era offer viewers? How might an examination of this reconstruction of a past lifestyle offer insights into the contemporary urban lifestyles against which this nostalgic fantasy is contrasted?

Furthermore, despite the propensity for these shows to convey political messages or idealise and distort the reality of rural living, Arctic-centric reality programmes have “emerged as influential media franchises that have lifted up their respective networks but also a style of television programming that marries economy, working life, and renderings of Arctic ecology as final frontier” (Moscato, 2017, p. 10). *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is a prime example of this success as it is one of the most popular series owned by the Discovery Channel, having been recorded in the top three series of the month in January 2016 and drawing 4.19 million viewers (Zimmerman 2017, personal communication). In its most recent quarter on-air it was recorded as Sunday night’s most-watched unscripted cable series, averaging 3.47 million total viewers (Zimmerman 2017, personal communication). It is because of this phenomenon that I am particularly interested in the urban viewers of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*.

Theoretical Framework

I depend on a collection of key theorists whose work I have found particularly useful for my examination of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. Svetlana Boym's (2001) work on nostalgia forms the theoretical framework of my study and I take on the project of applying her theories of nostalgia to the field of reality television. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) Boym combines personal memoir, philosophical essay and historical analysis to explore the condition of nostalgia and argues that nostalgia is "not merely an individual sickness, but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion" (Introduction, para. 12). To make her argument Boym focuses on collective nostalgia, which she explores in relation to national biography and the construction of individual identity (2001, Introduction, para. 14). Though her primary focus is collective nostalgia, she also chronicles the history of nostalgia and provides an insightful exploration into individual nostalgia. Within this work Boym defines a number of concepts that can describe how nostalgia is experienced. Most pertinent to my work has been her distinction between two varieties of nostalgia: "reflective" and "restorative" (2001, Introduction, para. 20). This theory has allowed me to examine *Alaska: The Last Frontier* from two different angles, recognising that nostalgia may be evoked, experienced and dealt with 'restoratively' or 'reflectively'. Examining nostalgia in this way provides critical insights into the delivery of the text's reactionary message and shows that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* uses restorative nostalgia to reconstruct an idealised representation of conservative ideals that imply a return to these principles will resolve a dissatisfaction with the effects of late capitalism and urban environments.

Exploring restorative and reflective nostalgia is valuable in that it accounts for nostalgia's comparative function to show that in both modes of nostalgia the individual critiques 'how they are now' in relation to how they 'could be', or how people 'once were'. Furthermore, restorative nostalgia is central in the formation of national identities. Since America's national identity is founded on frontier mythology and the ideologies of the frontier myth are so distinctly conveyed through *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, it is clear that restorative nostalgia plays a prominent role in the programme. Throughout this project I consider *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* various levels of nostalgic engagement and consider how restorative and reflective nostalgia manifest through the reality television programme and its characters, editing, and

narratives and in how it addresses the viewer at home. I argue that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and its subjects are more restoratively nostalgic as the show represents a lifestyle that is distinctly reminiscent of a bygone era, and that it advocates that this form of pre-industrial rural living as superior to other lifestyles. However, I also argue that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers a space, albeit less obvious than its restoratively nostalgic elements, in which the viewer at home can potentially engage in reflective nostalgia by using the lingering shots of spectacular imagery as an opportunity to compare and critique the disparity between the idealised representation of rural life and the significantly different reality of late capitalist urban life environments.

Central to Boym's (2001) work on restorative nostalgia is its close relationship with the construction of national identity. Though his work precedes Boym's and therefore does not acknowledge the term 'restorative nostalgia', I found Jonathan Steinwand's (1997) writing on nostalgia particularly useful. His work discusses the role that nostalgia plays in the distortion of memory and the use of nostalgia in the construction of national identity. This approach is useful in my examination of the ways in which *Alaska: The Last Frontier* evokes nostalgia for an idealised, rural and pre-industrial vision of American life. I also used Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley's (2006) work on how nostalgia functions within the individual. Their analysis reflects Boym's sociological approach to examining nostalgia, paying specific attention to nostalgia as a concept of temporality. This provides insight into the powerful role that social change plays in the prolific emergence of nostalgia in modern society.

Maureen Hogan and Timothy Pursell (2008, 2009) tread similar ground to mine in their work on recent theories of rural masculinities and nostalgia. Their work is concerned with "how Alaska is constructed in the nation's imagination as the nature state, in general" and "how these narratives of frontier wilderness are intrinsically tied up with an Alaskan identity, specifically a masculine one" (2008 p. 63). They examine how notions of Alaska as an unspoiled "boundless land of opportunity" (2009, p. 186) and historic experience "intersect with contemporary constructions of masculinity" (2009, p. 187). They argue that it is a "unique characteristic of Alaskan gender identity" to believe that "Alaska still epitomizes the notion of wilderness" (2009, p. 188). They look at discourses around urbanity, ruralness, wilderness, late capitalism, national identity and the Alaskan frontier, showing how a nostalgic lens causes

these topics to depict Alaska as a “special situation: unique, incomparable, and exceptional” (2009, p. 188). They too use Boym’s theories on reflective and restorative nostalgia to show how meaning is derived from the past and is exemplified in the everyday discourses, images and practices in Alaska (2008, p. 70). While Hogan and Pursell’s work explores similar areas as I do, they are specifically focussed on how nostalgic ideas of being a ‘real Alaskan’ affects masculine identities. Whereas, my work is concerned with questions of nostalgia and its relation to televisual representations of family, community and labour in an Alaskan wilderness setting.

Television is often seen as being about the present. Amy Holdsworth notes that it is widely characterized by its “‘transience’, ‘ephemerality’, ‘forgetability’ and even more seriously, it is seen as an ‘amnesiac’, responsible for the ‘undermining of memory’” (2011, p. 1). Yet, through applying theories of nostalgia to television, we see that it is actually very much invested in memory and that the representations of the present featured on television, in many cases, rely upon a relationship with an imagined past.

Although there is extensive research on nostalgia, little of it addresses television and precious little is related to reality television. Holdsworth is one of the few television theorists who address the role of nostalgia in television and in *Television, Memory and Nostalgia* (2011), she explores nostalgia “as a way of approaching television’s relationship to and memories of itself” (p. 6). She considers nostalgia as a specific form of televisual engagement whereby “nostalgia can operate as a mode of critique prompting reflection on patterns of change and continuity” (2011, p. 103) and explains that, “whilst the nostalgic text is inhabited by forms of longing and loss, a capacity to be critical is also produced by the nostalgic appraisal of who we were and how we have changed” (2011, p. 112). This section of Holdsworth’s work has informed my exploration of how the nostalgic evocation of ‘frontier life’ represented on *Alaska: The Last Frontier* can be read as a response to late capitalist urban life. In the same vein as Holdsworth, I consider the nostalgic representation of ‘frontier life’ as material that produces critical comparisons between the (idealised) images of America’s past and the experience of present-day late capitalist urban life. Through these comparisons, the individual is prompted to reflect on ‘how they are now’ in relation to ‘how people were’ in the past. Holdsworth only briefly refers to Boym’s (2001) theory on reflective nostalgia as she discusses a particular programme.

She makes the point that like reflective nostalgia, the television programme *Life on Mars* (2006–2007) does not try to recover the past literally, but mediates history and passage of time (2011, pp. 109–110). In more recent work Debarhana Baruah (2016) echoes Holdsworth in considering television through ideas of memory and nostalgia. Unlike Holdsworth, Baruah uses Boym’s theory on reflective nostalgia extensively to show how *Mad Men* (2007–2015) engages with processes of televisual memory. She illustrates how nostalgia and memory can be enmeshed in televisual narratives textually, intertextually and through serial formats where new memories are formed in the present (Baruah, 2016, p. 33). Baruah’s considerable use of Boym’s work shows an existing theoretical relationship between television and nostalgia to which my work will contribute. Boym’s work on the comparative function of nostalgia thus allows me to argue that reality television uses nostalgia to express a dissatisfaction with the effects of contemporary post-capitalist and urban norms.

Certain theorists have referred to the role of nostalgia in reality television in a way that demonstrates the importance of thinking about this genre using ideas of memory and longing. In their book *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (2012), Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn briefly discuss ‘nostalgia-based’ reality programmes and shows how certain shows create an emotional hook by coupling nostalgia with modern relevance. In their work they refer to British shows such as *The Way We Cooked* (2002) and *The Way We Travelled* (2003) to illustrate how nostalgia is used by recycling “older programmes from earlier decades” (2012, p. 23) in order to chart their influence on the public. These nostalgia-based shows do not necessarily deal with nostalgia as a subject but engage audiences on an emotional level so that in a sense the audience consumes nostalgia. Contemporary popular programmes such as *American Pickers* (2010–) and *Pawn Stars* (2009–) (with their numerous spin-offs) reflect this manifestation of nostalgia through the use of objects from the past. Historian Jarret Ruminski explains that *American Pickers* “is popular because it feeds off of the age-old American love for consuming nostalgia” (2013). These shows appeal to nostalgic sentiment as the characters recollect history by focusing on “concrete manifestations” of the past (Ruminski, 2013). He argues that “for many Americans, the best way to relieve themselves from the anxiety associated with modernity is to embrace the past via nostalgia” (2013). Thus, these shows represent people sourcing actual parts of history as a means of reconnecting with memories and ideas of the

past, albeit an extremely idealised past. As a result, these nostalgia-based shows “help t.v. viewers revel in the pursuit of history and simpler times” through watching the characters do precisely that onscreen (Ruminski, 2013). These restoratively nostalgic responses to social change are similarly represented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. The characters seem to thrive in their pursuit of maintaining a past way of life and in the show convey a reactionary message that idealises the representations of a pre-industrial American way of living.

From a different angle, Leigh Edwards explores the correlation between reality television and nostalgia, noting that the genre uses nostalgia to deal with pertinent topics such as social change (2012, p. 87). She identifies that despite the sensationalism of reality television, the genre “portrays substantive issues (even though it does not solve them)” and stages its own debates around older norms against newer developments (2012, p. 87). Edwards argues that reality television’s use of nostalgia is one of four stances toward social change, as certain shows look backward with a “recuperative nostalgia” for past social conventions. This ‘recuperative’ function of nostalgia echoes characteristics of Boym’s restorative nostalgia as more traditional social features are represented within a contemporary televisual context. Edwards makes her point through focusing primarily on reality television’s fondness for representing the family, and using *The Osbournes* (2002–2005) as an example, she illustrates how certain shows amalgamate representations of newer family forms with nostalgic sentiments for more traditional nuclear family models. In this case, the programme juxtaposes “a famously hard-living heavy metal family with classic sitcom family plot-lines, edited to emphasise the irony of seeing the cursing, drug-abusing rock star Ozzy and his brood hilariously butchering *Ozzie and Harriet*-style narratives” (2013, p. 96). It is this incorporation of more traditional family narratives, such as those found in older television shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–1966), that reveals American culture still has an “intense nostalgia for the older norm” (2013, p. 96). More recent shows such as *Sister Wives* (2010–), *19 Kids and Counting* (2005–2015) and *Keeping Up with The Kardashians* (2007–) reflect this observation as each exhibits the diversity of modern family forms, yet narratively upholds some semblance of traditional nuclear family values or practices. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this tendency of reality television to stage its own debates around older norms against newer developments. The show presents a context in which family, community and labour relations are so

reminiscent of pre-industrial American life that it evokes a reflectively nostalgic critique of contemporary late capitalist lifestyles.

Furthermore, various theorists have explored the correlation between reality television and nostalgia through focusing on how consumers seem to long for the 'authentic' representations of 'real' life. Randall Rose and Stacy Wood discuss how "consumers increasingly value authenticity in a world where their mass production of artefacts causes them to question the plausibility of the value" (2005, p. 286). They therefore suggest that "the success of reality-based entertainment may be a reflection of the modernists' nostalgia for authenticity among the class of consumers to whom it is most rigorously denied" (2005, p. 286). Cultural historian T.J. Jackson Lears makes the same point in his work on the role of American advertising in complex cultural transformation to explain how reality television plays on late capitalist nostalgic sentiments for the "hard resistant reality of things" (1983, 'The Emergence of a Therapeutic Ethos', para. 13) and "a richer, fuller life" (1983, 'Advertising Strategies and the Therapeutic Ethos', para. 49). Lears argues that since the "urban-industrial transformation of the nineteenth century" (1983, 'The Emergence of a Therapeutic Ethos', para. 13), a sense of unreality has prevailed in urban life, which has had a "corrosive impact on personal identity" (1983, 'The Emergence of a Therapeutic Ethos', para. 13). He argues that the 'luxuries' of civilization "have made life curiously insubstantial" and has left urban Americans nostalgic for a more intense experience of reality (1983, 'The Emergence of a Therapeutic Ethos', para. 13). Lears uses this theory to discuss 'therapeutic advertising' and how this method of advertising was developed to "arouse consumer demand by associating products with imaginary states of wellbeing" (1983, 'Advertising Strategies and the Therapeutic Ethos', para. 51). Essentially, advertising started to suggest that the product "would transform the buyer's life" (1983, 'Advertising Strategies and the Therapeutic Ethos', para. 49). Mark Andrejevic uses Lears's work to argue that "reality TV recapitulates the promise of advertising developed during the advent of mass consumer society (and ever since)" by promising a "digital enclosure" that offers "a space within which experience is intensified" (2004, p. 144). In other words, Andrejevic claims that reality television purports to offer relief from feelings of unreality, therefore appealing to nostalgic sentiments for authenticity and the 'hard resistant reality of things'. Andrejevic's work fits well with my examination of the way *Alaska: The Last Frontier*

calls upon restorative nostalgia to reconnect with the idea of what it means to be a 'true' American. The show provides a seemingly in-depth representation of frontier living that not only restores a sense of the past but also offers momentary relief from the developments of late capitalism by demonstrating an alternative lifestyle that purports to be authentically American.

The work I have discussed shows that reality television uses nostalgia as a means of engaging audiences emotionally. On one level, nostalgia is consumed as a way of satiating a desire to emotionally reconnect with ideas and memories of the past. However, on another level nostalgia is used as a form of response to the contemporary experience of urban life, and certain shows appeal to nostalgic sentiments for authenticity and a way of dealing with pertinent topics, helping the audience to grapple with the changes that have developed in social structures since the emergence of industrialisation and urbanisation.

The recent increase in reality television programmes focused on rural lives makes for a relatively novel site for the application of these ideas, and any study in this field would add to a growing body of research concerning reality television. The contribution that this project brings to the field lies in my examination of nostalgia as a form of reactionary response to late capitalism and my application of this theory to reality television's representation of rural lives. There is little theory that brings these ideas together. Thus, my application of theories about nostalgia in reality television offers a way of rethinking nostalgia's role in television. It develops the understanding of how nostalgia functions within a televisual context and identifies how the reality television genre and its subgenre of lifestyle television facilitate the evocation of nostalgia.

My research is supported by close textual analysis of the 20 episodes that make up *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* fourth season. This is a discursive and analytical project in which I draw on the work of other scholars in textual analysis, audience studies, production studies, and surveys of population distribution in order to theorise about the role of nostalgia in reality television's representation of rural lives.

Although there are other programmes to which the same ideas apply, I chose to focus my study on *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is a rich text that offers a productive site

for analysis within the scope of this project. I plan to consider other shows in future work and expand this avenue of study.

Considering the vastness of television series today and the fact that most series run for more than one season, selecting texts to sample presented a challenge. Jason Mittell discusses this problem in relation to long running serial narratives, and identifies that in the past two decades, television story telling has seen a “reconceptualization of the boundary between episodic and serial forms ...” (2006, p. 39). Mittell describes this model of television storytelling as ‘narrative complexity’, where there is seldom plot closure at the end of each narrative, thus foregrounding ongoing stories (2006, p. 32). Although Mittell’s work refers to fictional television and mine is about reality television, the same structures apply. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents a serial narrative, sustained by the ongoing need for the Kilchers to survive in the Alaskan wilderness. For as long as the family lives in this way, so too will the subject matter for this show. Hence, the seventh season of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is currently being aired. However, when I embarked on this project, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* had only recently completed its fourth season; thus, I chose to examine all of the episodes from Season 4, as they would provide the most current example of the show’s discourse. I chose not to carry on looking at later seasons as the project developed since it is a considerable amount of textual material. I decided to focus closely on the fourth season rather than trying to speak with authority on seven seasons of material.

I have not conducted any ethnographic audience research. This is a discursive and analytical project that examines the ways in which this reality television text constructs nostalgic discourse. While audience research is beyond the scope of the current study, I believe that this work could provide a fascinating basis for future ethnographic enquiries.

Understanding Nostalgia

Nostalgia (from *nostos*—‘return home’, and *algia*—‘longing’) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. (Boym, 2001, Introduction, para. 3)

Nostalgia is an effect—it is a feeling, and one that seems quite nebulous and difficult to pin down. The general contemporary understanding of nostalgia is a person’s or community’s

sentimentality for the past. Jonathan Steinwand describes nostalgia as a sort of homesickness, a pain (from the Greek word *algos*) or longing to return home (from the Greek word *nostos*) or to some lost past (1997, p. 9).

Both Boym and Steinwand identify the longing to return home as a key characteristic of nostalgia; however, Boym notes that the idea of 'home' is also imaginative and therefore may either be a variation of the truth or an entirely unrealistic idea of the past. These descriptions of nostalgia intersect with work on television, as television is a domestic medium defined by a relationship with the idea of 'home'. Much television content is about home but the actual lived experiences of home for television viewers are varied and unpredictable. These experiences may not fit the ideal of home celebrated in television content.

Importantly, the return 'home' to which these theorists refer is less about returning to the physical building of a house and more a return to an emotionally comfortable and ideal state that once made the nostalgic person feel emotionally whole:

To feel at home is to know that things are in their places and so are you; it is a state of mind that doesn't depend on an actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn't know the temptation of nostalgia. (Boym, 2001, Chapter 12, para. 1)

Therefore, the term 'home' embodies a complex state of one being emotionally stable and content, not a physical location. Here too, theories of nostalgia intersect with television studies, as Boym identifies the need for intimacy in the nostalgic condition and television is described as a medium of intimacy. The nostalgic person has not necessarily experienced this state of contentment in their past, but the imagination is employed in the creation of the imagined image or 'memory', filling in the gaps between reality and fantasy. The imagination also supplements memory in a way that purifies, clarifies and simplifies the image (Steinwand, 1997, p. 9). Through this process, "the unrepresentable loss, painful as it may be, is thus transformed by nostalgic recollection into a beautiful form" (Steinwand, 1997, p. 10). Therefore, the nostalgic person's memories are not only made to seem more appealing through the intervention of the imagination, they also may not have been a part of the person's history all together. Acknowledging this amalgamation of memory, fantasy, and imagination is

important in my study of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, because it helps to explain how nostalgia can be evoked through the text without the individual having actually lived rurally and self-sufficiently or having experienced the sense of contentment derived from such a lifestyle. Through representing images of emotional fulfilment associated with living in rural Alaska, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers material for the imagination to forge a 'memory'. Alaska has never been the real home of most viewers; however, I argue that the images of bygone America evokes the sense of a lost 'home', an era that is perceived to be more appealing than the present late capitalist reality of most urban viewers.

Understanding nostalgia as a reaction to loss and upheaval is key to this study. It allows for an account of the powerful role played by social changes or perceived social changes. Through understanding the relationship between social change and nostalgia, we see how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* may evoke nostalgia for the viewer experiencing the changes brought on by modernity and capitalism. The changes that underpin modernity's links to nostalgia are tied to the effects of capitalism, not only in terms of material relations of production and consumption but also in terms of the ideas that informed this social change. Thus, the nostalgia evoked by changes, globalization, multiculturalism, feminism, and civil rights movements, is often a longing for precisely what imperialism and modernity has destroyed (Rosaldo, 1989, pp. 107–108). Essentially, the nostalgia is not just for pre-industrial living, but for a very conservative and traditional understanding of American identity, 'home', and family life.

One of the most significant social changes in American (and world) history was the onset of the modern era that gave rise to industrialisation, urbanisation and capitalism. Though all five chapters of this thesis discuss particular facets of these changes in detail, at this point it is worth briefly noting certain changes that occurred during this time for the purpose of illustrating how a sense of 'home' was disrupted because of social changes, and thus initiating the emergence of nostalgia.

While nostalgia has been present for centuries, the modern era gave rise to a widespread emergence of nostalgia owing to the drastic change in the representation of time; this occurred between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Boym, 2001, Chapter 2, para. 18). This shift in the treatment of time was largely due to an emerging mass culture, which meant that production lines were increased as the demand for material products strengthened. The rate

of production became rapid, working hours extended and many businesses opted to implement work shifts throughout the night. These actions were set in place to satisfy an emerging consumerist market and to supply the increasing demand: “The world went from using an hourglass for time keeping to railroad schedules, time was no longer shifting sand; time was money” (Boym, 2001, Chapter 2, para. 18). Here, Boym talks less to time-telling practices than the change in perception of time: Industry needed to tell time not by the hour, like an hourglass does, but by the minute in order to be efficient and maximize productivity. If productivity was maximized, so was the financial gain. Time became a valuable commodity despite it being intangible. Therefore, time began to be perceived as money and every second was given a monetary value.

Susan Hegeman traces the emergence of modernisation in America to the establishment of a “highly developed urban and industrial core in the Northeast and upper Midwest” (1999, p. 22). Surrounding this area was an “extensive” and “remote rural periphery” that in a sense “extended well beyond the borders of the nation into eastern and southern Europe” and served as the source of a “seemingly limitless supply of immigrant labor” (Hegeman, 1999, p. 22). This availability of labour contributed substantially to the industrialisation of the country and bolstered its economic and demographic growth, which in turn enabled America to become a strong player in foreign markets. As a result of this, by the early twentieth century the United States “was more modernized than was Europe, particularly in regard to the development of industry, mass media, and consumer culture” (Hegeman, 1999, p. 22). Naturally, the reality of America’s modernisation process was far more complicated than these brief details, involving resounding ramifications in more than just the economic and industrial sectors of the nation.

In their sociological works, both Lynn Spigel (1992) and Hans Pols (2003) identify that the changes experienced in the economic and industrial sectors during modernisation also impacted the rhythms of families and communities. With industrialisation and urbanisation came a separation between the home and the working place. Whereas in the pre-industrial era the home and workplace were one and the same, the industrial revolution meant that the middle-class man needed to leave his home and travel to work daily (Spigel, 1992, p. 13). Workers living further afield needed to leave the countryside or their country and “relocate to

urban areas to find work in cities where capitalist enterprises were situated” (Pols, 2003, p. 195). Evidently, life as it was once perceived had been significantly disrupted and ‘lost’.

Pickering and Keightley describe this process as follows:

The experience of loss is endemic to living in modernity, regardless of whatever version of it applies in any particular time or place. Whether through war, revolution or regime change, mass involuntary migration and emigration, or less dramatically through social mobility or social redevelopment and the dispersion of existing communities built up over time, change and attendant feelings of loss have altered how the past is seen and considered. (2006, p. 920–921)

Importantly, Pickering and Keightley illustrate how the emotional turmoil caused by social change leads to the past being perceived in a different light, thus echoing Steinwand’s and Boym’s argument that during times of upheaval and discontent, the past tends to be perceived as a more attractive time and space; the imagination clarifies, purifies and simplifies images of the past.

In her account of nostalgia’s origins and the onset of modernity, Boym concludes that nostalgia emerges as a “defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals” (2001, Introduction, para. 5). Pickering and Keightley echo Boym, stating: “Nostalgia is a form of reaction to the velocity and vertigo of modern temporality” (2006, p. 923). Both of these descriptions account for the powerful role that social changes play and point to the attributes of modernity as being the root of nostalgia’s prolific emergence in modern society. Considerable industrial, technological and sociological shifts have occurred since the onset of modernism and our current moment has widely been theorised as either “post” modern or “late capitalist” (Targ 2006, Jameson 1991, Hutcheon & Valdes 1998-2000).

‘Late capitalism’ is an extensively theorised concept that have been explored by notable theorists such as Ernest Mandel (1975) and Frederic Jameson (1991). The term ‘late capitalism’ is widely used to describe economic developments and their subsequent sociological effects since the Second World War. Considering late capitalism in relation to television is particularly significant for television studies as the medium is itself a product of and an agent of late capitalist culture. In fact, television has been used by theorists to stand as a symbol of late

capitalism, for example, Jameson describes television and the video medium as the most “likely candidate of cultural hegemony” in late capitalism (1991, p. 69). Discussing the late capitalist phase also means looking at Boym’s points about modernity in terms of current conditions of change and current longings. This is not to say that elements of modernity do not overlap with late capitalism.

In his study on the key features of late capitalism, specifically focused on America, Harry Targ considers the concept of ‘late capitalism’ to be the most useful because:

It suggests something about this time in capitalism’s development historically; that capitalism may be overdeveloped and hence subject to stresses, strains, and pressures for radical change; that capitalism today is characterized by a variety of new features requiring analysis; and that among these features are special kinds of economic concentration, globalization, and cultural homogenization. (2006, p. 15)

I discuss the effects of late capitalism at length in my fourth chapter, using Targ’s (2006) work to illustrate the parallels between capitalism and late capitalism. At this juncture, however, it is worth noting that although nostalgia’s prolific emergence is considered an effect of modernity and capitalism, it is not confined to this period. It is a recurring effect that is endemic and arguably magnified in late capitalist society. Targ explains that the sense of loss, disruption, exploitation and isolation associated with capitalism is experienced more intensely under late capitalism as a result of labour practices, primarily. Thus, nostalgia continues to be relevant and functions as a tool to negotiate the changes and disruption of late capitalist urban life. Moreover, America has transitioned from its modern period to what is termed a ‘postmodern’ context. Postmodernism is often seen as interchangeable with late capitalism and has been described as “the culture of late capitalism” by Jameson (1991). Nostalgia has also been theorised as an effect associated with late capitalism or postmodernism and this relationship has been explored by theorists such as Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdes (1998–2000), and Frederick Jameson (1991) who described our present context as an era that evokes feelings of nostalgia by commodifying and consuming ideas of the past (Jameson, 1991, pp. 53–65) rather than actually acknowledging the realities of the historical past (Hutcheon & Valdes, 1998–2000, pp. 22–23).

In my examination of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, I use Boym's theories on restorative and reflective nostalgia to show that the programme is conservative and reactionary in its message. Not only do I consider the nostalgic performance of the characters, but I also examine how the programme features a form of nostalgia that idealises an apparently 'lost' rural, pre-industrial and traditional lifestyle. However, this imagining of the past is highly exclusionary and does not account for the complexities of land ownership, racial genocide, gendered inequality and the case of many deaths from starvation and disease in early American history (Thornton, 1987, pp. 43–44). Furthermore, in its reactionary message, there is a disregard for more recent changes that have been brought about through movements such as feminism, civil rights and multiculturalism. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this distorted narrative of America's past and offers a purified, clarified and simplified portrayal of returning to traditional values and living a 'frontier life'. It offers such representations as a way of conveying dissatisfaction with the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation, using nostalgia as a means to evoke a longing for conservative mores.

Reflective and Restorative Nostalgia

Boym uses the terms 'restorative nostalgia' and 'reflective nostalgia' to describe two modes in which the nostalgic person can cope with the longing, and through this process come to a more fulfilling emotional state. Restorative and reflective nostalgic individuals may have had the same upbringing and experiences in their lives, they could even have endured the same joys and the same hardships, and they may even have lived an identical lifestyle; however, the way in which they cope with longing for an alternative time or space may differ (Boym, 2001, Chapter 4, Chapter 5).

Restorative nostalgia focuses on an attempt to literally return home. The restorative nostalgic person focuses energy on recreating the past or restoring historical artefacts, they attempt a "transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym, 2001, Introduction, para. 20), they are concerned with the 'truth' or traditions of the past, and they do not see themselves as nostalgic. This 'transhistorical reconstruction' means that the restoratively nostalgic person attempts to reconstruct bygone entities and reinstate them into the present with the intention of them being part of the future too. The restoratively nostalgic person does this in order to

rebuild the 'home', a familiar and comfortable state that is perceived to be lost. In this case 'familiar' may mean actual buildings or monuments but can also mean traditions or practices. In *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, this 'restorative' mode of nostalgia is seen in its subjects' attempts to materially reproduce a settler lifestyle.

Physical constructions that are recreated in their 'original image' are generally benign and have little effect on the rhythms of life. However, it is when traditions, customs, practices or conventions are reinstated that there is the potential for distortion. Boym explains:

The new traditions are characterized by a higher degree of symbolic formalization and ritualization than the actual peasant customs and conventions after which they were patterned. Here are two paradoxes. First, the more rapid and sweeping the pace and scale of modernization, the more conservative and unchangeable the new traditions tend to be. Second, the stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented. (2001, Chapter 4, para. 4)

Alaska: The Last Frontier distinctly reflects this description: There is little reflexive awareness of 'tradition' being something that is constantly remade and discursively constructed. The programme's understanding of what 'tradition' is seems frozen in a vision of frontier life. The characters continuously refer to the importance of upholding the same lifestyle that their (pioneering) ancestors lived and emphasise how beneficial a 'traditional way of life' is. This radically rural lifestyle is associated with the frontiersmen and is therefore tied to a highly constructed perception of what American tradition is. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is also extremely selective in its representations of America's past: There is never any mention of the racial genocide, disease and warfare that were introduced and encountered by early settlers (Thornton, 1987, pp. 43–44).

Though individual restorative nostalgia does not intend to engage in social constructivism (Boym, 2001, Chapter 4, para. 5), characteristics of restorative nostalgia can be utilized to influence and manipulate groups or nations by directing thoughts and actions in the way that the manipulator intends (Boym, 2001, Chapter 4, paras. 4–5). National identity can be heavily influenced by the restoration of past ideas and memories, and crafting a national identity is achieved by the "freezing of a particular moment which the enthusiast takes as a model to

orient and anticipate the nation's future" (Steinwand, 1997, p. 11). The idea of an "imagined" past is particularly significant at this moment in America's cultural and political history given Donald Trump's presidential success on the back of the slogan "Make America Great Again". This idea also emerges from an imagined idea of an American home and an idealised past. Using nostalgia to form a national identity essentially means that nostalgia is used as a tool of distraction, and the understanding that the imagination steps in to fill the gaps in memory is used to manipulate ideas of the nation. According to Boym, "nostalgia works as a double-edged sword: it seems to be an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool" (2001, Introduction, para. 18). Politics is often labelled as a profession riddled with lies and deceit and devoid of emotions or feeling; however, employing nostalgia solves this problem with little resistance because nostalgia primarily deals with emotions and a person's historical truth.

Although reality television is not always explicitly linked to politics, it is nonetheless political. Biressi and Nunn explain that the existence of politics in reality television "will be differently articulated from the traditional forms of politicised documentary and it often requires different conceptual tools than those employed to unpack the politics of classical documentary genres" (2012, p. 2). They describe the politics of reality television as 'cultural politics', which means that it is more concerned with representations of ideals, attitudes and behaviours that influence contemporary culture and politics, rather than explicitly dealing with political subjects such as "electoral power or labour power" (2012, p. 3). They also note that the politics of reality television is sometimes "conservative, retributive and judgemental"; however, it can also be "ostensibly simple, supposedly non-judgemental, apolitical" and for 'ordinary people' (2012, p. 3). In this case, Biressi and Nunn caution that despite the guise of impartial representation, the text is certainly saying more than what is evidently represented:

The playing out of social difference, for example in *Wife Swap* or *You Are What You Eat* or *Neighbours from Hell*, is no less incendiary and no less valuable as a social document of classed identity, social hierarchy and status anxiety than, for example, the acclaimed television drama documentary *Cathy Come Home* (2012, p. 3).

This indicates that reality television is political and can potentially contribute to the recognition and development of national identity. The idea of national identity is important to Chapter 2

where I discuss America's idealisation of its seventeenth- to twentieth-century frontier movement and its subsequent idealisation of the American wilderness. From this idealisation, America's national identity and narrative have been built. I argue that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this ideological and narrative construct, and in doing so, romanticises an exclusionary narrative of American values based on conservative ideals. A part of America's national perception imagines that being in relation with the wilderness and a rudimentary way of life is more beneficial and desirable to the individual than being in relation with the constructs of urbanity and industrialisation. This perception typically ignores the difficulties of living without modern conveniences, such as immediate medical care, water supply, or sanitation, and focuses more on the sublimity of the American wilderness. Another part of America's national perception idealises the primitive lifestyle of the frontiersmen and imagines that living a primitive lifestyle will yield success, personal fulfilment and the same sense of freedom that the frontiersmen were perceived to have had. In this construct, the historical truths of the pre-existing American Indian¹ population and their genocide are normally extracted from the narrative, which Moscato argues is a prevailing fault in most North American Arctic television shows as they do not adequately grapple "with issues facing indigenous people in the region where they operate" (2017, p. 9). In essence, the particular moment at which the frontiersmen perceived the New World to be uninhabited and 'free for the taking' is frozen and used to manipulate the individual into focusing on the success and strength of the frontiersmen in overcoming the wilderness, which distracts them from the violence, death and starvation that was also part of this history.

In restorative nostalgia the focus is on *nostos*, the return home (Boym, 2001, Introduction, para. 3), the literal attempt to restore and reinstate selected parts of the past in the present. Conversely, reflective nostalgia focuses on *algia*, the wistful, ironic and desperate longing of 'home' yet it delays the actual homecoming (Boym, 2001, Introduction, para. 3). It is not important for the reflectively nostalgic person to literally return (or recreate) 'home'. The reflectively nostalgic person prefers to contemplate the 'home' and spend time in thought

¹ Most terms used are seen as Eurocentric impositions. The people themselves prefer to be called by their specific tribal identities (Dunbar-Oritz & Gilio, 2016, p. 145-149). However, my work speaks broadly on this matter and I have chosen to use the term 'American Indian' as it seems to be the most commonly used.

about the past. There is no attempt to recover a former identity from recollections, and in fact, the individual savours the temporal and spatial distance that separates the past and present. They are well aware that the past cannot be restored and therefore spend time longing to engage with the past, reflecting on it critically and considering its relation to the present. These moments of reflection are offered in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* with lingering landscape imagery. Although the show's narrative is predominantly restorative, these moments offer a space for contemplation and evaluation: A space for nostalgia's comparative function to assess the rural context of the show against the prevailing urban environments of America.

It is also the nature of reflective nostalgia to enable progress and change, as reflective nostalgia can empower the nostalgic person to move forward after encountering drastic changes. Whereas modernity promoted the rejection of the past in order to instigate change and progress, the change and progress that reflective nostalgia facilitates requires consulting the past in order to move forward. In these cases, the nostalgic person is not beholden to their past or their idea of 'home', but the past is used as a tool for moving forward and regaining a sense of emotional fulfilment:

Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales (Boym, 2001, Introduction, para. 14).

Thus, in reflective nostalgia the past is considered but there is not necessarily an attempt to restore or replicate it in the present. The reflectively nostalgic person considers their past with a critical eye, the details of the past are sifted through and valuable aspects are earmarked as worthy of implementing in the present. This is potentially the case for many viewers who cannot actually abandon their urban lives for the Alaskan wilderness but can only watch the performance of this restoration. In these instances, the individual may use the show as a means for contemplating the differences between their contemporary context and the antiquated rural lifestyle demonstrated onscreen: Assessing the elements of this lifestyle that are advantageous against urban norms. Additionally, particular aspects of one's past can be earmarked as less desirable for the present and future, much like the instances in which the

show's characters choose to use modern equipment, such as drills and bulldozers, instead of older methods of construction.

Both restorative and reflective nostalgia respond to the current environment of the individual and through *Alaska: The Last Frontier* convey a dissatisfaction with the sociological norms of late capitalist life. Both types of nostalgia work together in the text to encourage an idealised representation of the past and rural living. Though the characters in the show seem to primarily engage in restorative nostalgia, the programme in its broader cultural consumption potentially offers a more reflective space in which the viewer can consider the nostalgia represented on screen and deal with the nostalgia evoked for a rural and pre-industrialised American life. The discourse of reality television plays an important role in the reflective aspects of the text with certain characteristics of the genre facilitating moments that could potentially lead to reflection and evaluation. Despite a widespread critical disdain for reality television audiences as the 'dupes' of a medium that presents highly constructed texts as reality, there is an avenue of theory which contends that reality television has an element of irony and mockery built into its formulae (Smit 2015, Kavka 2012, Cloud 2010). Dana Cloud describes textual elements which call for an "ironic (dis)engagement with the text" (2010, p. 418). I will explore these calls for critical distance however, the programme predominantly offers a space for the viewers to indulge in restorative nostalgia without adopting the ironic position.

The Role of Reality Television

The category of reality television has become progressively more difficult to define as it has developed from its early stages. Traditionally, reality television was associated with "non-professional actors, unscripted dialogue, surveillance footage, hand-held cameras, [and] seeing events unfold as they are happening in front of the camera" (Hill, 2005, p. 41); however, the genre has developed so much in its treatment of 'reality' that this no longer encompasses all that reality television presents to its audience. Television scholars (Brunsdon, Johnson, Moseley & Wheatley, 2001; Corner, 1995, 1996; Kilborn, 1994) have offered their definitions and descriptions of reality television, all of which identify that the term 'reality television' has become a catchall phrase for a range of popular factual programming. There is also a consensus that the term's flexibility is largely owed to its similarities to multiple existing genres. For

example, *Survivor* (2000–), *Hell's Kitchen* (2005–) and *The Amazing Race* (2001–) are reality game shows and represent the traditional styles and techniques attributed to reality television, which are also decisively characteristic of observational documentary. Furthermore, they fall within the game show category, which means that they include game show characteristics such as elimination, team challenges, a regular host and a prize. In the same vein, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is a documentary style reality television programme and represents the traditional styles and techniques associated with reality television and observational documentary. The programme offers a private look into the lives of a family, and the audience takes on the role of passive observers. Shows that also fit this description would be *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, *Alaskan Bush People*, *Mama June: From Not to Hot* (2017–), and *Duck Dynasty* (2012–2017). However, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is also categorized as lifestyle television for its narratives of transformation, didactic address, and an overall focus on maintaining or improving one's sense of wellbeing. Within this category, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* would be listed alongside programmes such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003–2012), *Your Style in His Hands* (2013–2014) and *River Cottage: Three Go Mad* (2012). These examples illustrate precisely how varied reality television programming is and that one definition for this genre is impossible

In her book *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (2005), Annette Hill dedicates a whole chapter to defining reality television and thoroughly explores how the television industry, television scholars, and television audiences perceive what reality television means. This exploration concludes with Hill identifying the impossibility of a singular definition for the term, however she states:

If there is one defining characteristic that unites the disparate group of programmes that make up the reality genre it is the capacity to let viewers see for themselves. This unique function of factual television has become a key attraction for audiences of reality TV. (Hill, 2005, p. 55)

I use this definition to anchor *Alaska: The Last Frontier* within the reality television category. The programme uses the traditional styles and techniques associated with reality television and lets the audience see 'for themselves' how people live a self-sufficient rural lifestyle in the Alaskan wilderness. While part of the pleasure of the show is an apparent direct witnessing of

homesteading lifestyles, this experience is nonetheless guided by voice-over and editing. At the beginning of each narrative, a narrator briefly introduces the onscreen action and uses emotive descriptions such as “races against time”, “descends into chaos”, “thrown this year’s journey into disarray” or “gruelling struggle” (*On the Move*, Season 4, Episode 4). Although these phrases potentially shepherd the viewers’ perception of onscreen action, the overall impression is that there is little (obvious) manipulation of the text, and therefore the viewers are allowed to ‘see for themselves’. I use the phrase ‘see for themselves’ not only as a reference to the viewer being allowed to literally see what the characters are doing but also as a description for the viewers being allowed to interpret the text for themselves (or so it seems). The cameras seem to unobtrusively observe subtle ‘narratives of transformation’ and remain unseen even when characters address the camera to deliver instructional information. Thus, the term ‘see for themselves’ also describes how the programme offers learning opportunities and examples of transformations, providing the viewer with an opportunity to ‘see for themselves’ precisely how to practice living like the characters. Though this sense of ‘unmediation’ gives the impression of the programme being an accurate, ingenuous representation of real life, it is still a highly constructed text.

Reality television purports to present ‘ordinary’ lives and content associated with the domestic or the everyday. The family is one structure that reality television has dealt with throughout the genre’s existence. Many of the most influential reality television programmes have dealt with families and their interactions, and *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this. In 1973, *An American Family* aired on America’s Public Broadcasting Service and it has been described as “America’s first reality tv show” (Santoso, 2007). This programme chronicled the lives of the Loud family, a ‘normal’ American upper-class family living in California and offered viewers footage of their interactions over the course of seven months. Since this watershed show, numerous programmes have been produced following a similar trajectory. Probably one of the most notable categories of real-life television has been the proliferation of programmes centred on Hollywood’s celebrity families. *The Osbournes*, *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica* (2003–2005), *Run’s House* (2005–2009), *Hogan Knows Best* (2005–2007), and more recently, *Keeping Up with The Kardashians* are all programmes that have claimed to document the real day-to-day domestic lives of families that have already become famous through the entertainment

industry. Though these programmes are marked by their representation of radically turbulent, opulent, extravagant, and bizarre lifestyles, they essentially claim to present the more domestic, private and ordinary aspects of celebrity families. These programmes therefore need not present lifestyles that resemble the audience's sense of ordinary or everydayness to be popular.

Although the Kilcher family was not previously famous, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this observation in that it shares reality television's concern with families and the domestic but presents lifestyles that are radically different to the majority of viewers living in urban environments. What is considered ordinary or of domestic value in a rural context, is substantially different to how the majority of viewers living in urban environments would describe ordinary or domestic. To the general population of America, foraging for berries, making soap or hunting moose is not a common practice. Thus *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and similar programmes offer an amalgamation of what the featured subjects of the show deem ordinary but the viewers may deem unusual, what is of domestic value to the characters but seems wild to the viewers. These observations form the basis of my third chapter, where I argue that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* evokes nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship, reminiscent of a pre-industrial-revolution American culture. Reality television's interest in the family structure allows the programme to portray family values and practices that diverge from what is generally considered normal in contemporary urban environments. In the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, the Kilcher family represents values and practices that are reminiscent of a bygone era. These images are tremendously selective and consequently portray conservative values, such as a same-race heterosexual marriage having produced two or three children and being part of a community consisting of similarly structured families, as normal and fulfilling. This portrayal implies that newer forms of family and community that may involve single-parenting, divorce, homosexual or mixed-race partnerships or marriages, are not 'normal' and lack in enriching qualities. It also implies that the 'American family' is a nuclear, heteronormative and racially homogenous family. This idealisation of traditional values can be read as a reactionary response to the forced change in social structures since the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation and implies that through an appropriation of conservative values, society can find its remedy.

As I have already established, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents marked characteristics of the lifestyle genre. Two of these are the 'narratives of transformation' and didactic address that the programme presents. These characteristics facilitate the evocation nostalgia for an idealised, rural and pre-industrial vision of American life. My second and fourth chapters address these issues in relation to the programme's representation of the Alaskan wilderness and labour relations respectively.

Vital to my analysis of reality television's role in evoking nostalgia has been Annette Hill's work on 'the idea of learning' through reality television (2005) and Charlotte Brunsdon's work on reality television's lifestyle genre (2003). Hill discusses a number of overarching characteristics that have emerged since reality television's early stages, one of which pays specific attention to the idea of audiences learning from reality television. She identifies the informative address that infotainment and lifestyle programmes contain and discusses how these didactic elements offer learning opportunities to the audience within an entertainment frame. She argues that by offering "advice and tips on how to makeover your home, relationship, business, health and personal well-being" (2005, p. 79), reality television shows give the audience the opportunity to learn. It is important to note that Hill does not focus her discussions on programmes that are purely designed to offer do-it-yourself or how-to instruction. Her discussion is centred on more contemporary reality lifestyle programmes and how viewers learn through their informative elements that are positioned "within an entertainment frame" (2005, p. 79, p. 81). Thus, the trajectory of a programme need not be focused on educating the viewer in order for it to offer learning opportunities. This information interests me for it describes precisely how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* delivers its didactic address: It subtly offers the viewer an opportunity to learn how to live a self-sufficient lifestyle yet avoids an overpowering instructional address. The show provides a sense of restoration by engaging viewers in the process of making and doing. The viewers do not merely watch the past being restored but are given the sense that they can be involved in the process. I have applied my research on nostalgia to this information, recognising that nostalgia emerges from an individual's sense of loss and dissatisfaction with their reality, which generates a yearning for an improved sense of personal wellbeing. Thus, I use Hill's work to explore how the programme's learning opportunities play into the nostalgic

fantasy of acquiring an improved sense of wellbeing and fulfilment, which can be read as a response to the dissatisfying experience of late capitalist urban life.

Charlotte Brunsdon (2003) writes about reality television specifically from a lifestyle television perspective and discusses how this genre's didactic elements and narratives of transformation have changed over the years. Brunsdon focused her study on programmes that fit the typical mould of lifestyle television, *Changing Rooms* (1996–2004), *Garden Force* (1998–2005) etc., and describes how these programmes place an emphasis on improving one's sense of wellbeing by undergoing (or watching) grand transformations. I draw correlations between *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and the lifestyle genre by exploring how the programme represents narratives of transformation that are less dramatic yet retain an emphasis on improving one's sense of wellbeing and fulfilment. I present this point in Chapter 4 where I explore how the characters engage in labour practices, from beginning to completion, and through this process form narratives of transformation; not only do the characters complete their projects, but they also express an improved sense of wellbeing and fulfilment as a result of engaging in the entire process. Thus, the objects of labour and the characters' sense of wellbeing are transformed. These representations of labour do not reflect the reality of how labour is experienced under late capitalist practices. I therefore argue that narratives of transformation produce idealised images of labour practices reminiscent of pre-industrial America. These images can be read as a response to the dissatisfaction experienced through being subjected to late capitalist labour values and practices, expressing a nostalgic desire to pursue reactionary ideals. My study on *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of labour chimes productively with the work of Richard Wells (2015). Wells discusses how certain shows represent labour in a way that reveals "a deep yearning for hands-on labor and for jobs that actually produce something tangible" (2015, p. 35). In these programmes there are no "middle-class angst or anomie, no cubicles to confine one's spirit, no alienation" (2015, p. 36), which is a considerable contrast to the current American economy dominated by service industries (2015, p. 35). In my work, I directly address these ideas in relation to *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and thus contribute to an emerging body of work that is concerned with North American Arctic reality television shows and their representations of labour.

America's national identity is founded on the frontier mythology. This entails various ideologies (often with significant exclusions and elisions) that construct a specific vision of what the meaning of America is. The wilderness is a central point of patriotism relating to the success, courage, and freedom of the frontiersmen. America is also often represented as a place of family values and a nation made up of united communities. America is also one of the world's major centres for late capitalist economic forces, and its own economic history has changed radically. For many, however, these visions of America do not match their own day-to-day experience of late capitalist urban life. Considering these three cases, it seems that the nostalgic evocations of 'frontier life' that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers, is a way of engaging with the meaning of America and a reaction to late capitalist urban life.

This thesis is structured around five chapters. This chapter explains what nostalgia is and how it manifests in an individual and potentially, a nation. It also also explains and accounts for the role that reality television plays in evoking nostalgia. Chapter 2 explores the relationship between the wilderness and nostalgia. In particular, I consider how the 'frontier myth' structures the show's nostalgic representation of rural living. These nostalgic evocations of 'frontier life' respond to the prevailing urban landscapes that much of America's population inhabit. In building this argument I explore Frederick Turner (1953) and Richard Slotkin's (1973) works on America's history. Turner describes the 'frontier myth' and how its romantic distortion idealises man's encounter with the wilderness. Slotkin's work accounts for the erasure of the American Indian from the frontier myth and the American narrative of origin. This information supports the claim that the frontier myth is a selective narrative on which a highly constructed national identity is built. I draw on the works of William Cronon (1996) and Roderick Nash (1982) to show how America has come to idealise its historical frontier narrative and centres it on stories about inhabiting wild regions. Both Cronon and Nash describe this deep-rooted idealisation of the American frontier and wilderness and term it the 'frontier myth'. In essence, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this frontier myth by representing these long-standing ideals that evoke a longing to reconnect with what seems to be a lost rural past. I also examine how the show's representations of wilderness imagery responds to a nostalgic desire for 'simpler times' and a return to America's pre-industrial past. I approach this examination using television theory, arguing that television itself is a means of bringing

together rural and urban as it transports rural images into the urban home. I have paid specific attention to the reality television mode and uses the work of Annette Hill (2005), Helen Wheatley (2011) and Elke Weissman (2011) to show how certain characteristics of this genre facilitate the evocation of nostalgia for a closer connection to the values and practices associated with primitive living.

In my third chapter I discuss how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* evokes nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship and community, reminiscent of a pre-industrial revolution American culture. I rely on the work of Arlene Skolnick (1991, 1996), Stephanie Coontz (1995), Lynn Spigel (1992), and Phillip Webb (2011) to examine how the term 'family' is discursively constructed in American culture and work toward an understanding of how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* generates nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship. The programme also evokes nostalgia for a particular experience of community that is perceived as lost. I rely upon the work of John Demos (1974), David McMillan and David Chavis (1986), and Phillip Webb (2011) to explore the meaning of 'community' and the ways in which communities have been affected by the onset of industrialisation and urbanism. I also argue that even though present-day American nostalgia is generally attributed to a yearning to recapture the 'golden age' of the 1950s nuclear family, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* looks past the 1950s and generates nostalgia for a more eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century idea of the nuclear family and community. In this discussion, I primarily use McMillan and Chavis's four criteria for a definition and theory of sense of community (1986, p. 9) to illustrate how the programme highlights the integral part of the community in the Kilcher family's life, unlike the inward gazing nuclear family of the 1950s, and to substantiate this argument, I also draw from Hans Pols's description of pre-industrial communities (2003, p. 194).

To further understand the relationship between the urban setting in which the programme is largely consumed and the nostalgia for a sense of family and community that the programme evokes, I also explore the condition of anomie that Elwin Powell (1962), Hans Pols (2003), Robert Merton (1938), and Marco Orru (1983) have written about. Exploring this condition provides insight into how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* appeals to urban viewers and plays on nostalgic yearning for kinship and community that seems to have been lost in the late capitalist age. Through representing ideals vastly different from the ideals of contemporary urban

society, the programme potentially takes on a comparative function by offering an opportunity for the individual to critique their own reality against the idealised representation of rural life that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents.

Chapter 4 argues that the representation of labour in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* constructs a 'fantasy of wholeness' and that this process potentially evokes nostalgia for an idealised set of labour relations that are perceived to be lost in the late capitalist age. Late capitalist labour practices and relations are generally marked by dissatisfaction, alienation, and discouragement; the programme, however, represents labour as a fulfilling and enriching practice. I examine these idealised representations of labour as a response to how labour is experienced under late capitalism. To make this argument, I dedicate the first part of this chapter to discussing Karl Marx's theory of estranged labour and the four types of alienation (1978) that he identifies as experienced by the worker under capitalist labour conditions. In this section, I also establish how in the present age of late capitalism, Marx's nineteenth-century descriptions of capitalist labour conditions and their effects remain evident and are, in some cases, magnified. I then move on to consider the lifestyle television genre and its role in the representation of idealised labour relations and the evocation of nostalgia through *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. I present a case study from *Alaska: The Last Frontier* to show how the programme constructs a 'fantasy of wholeness' through representing idealised labour relations that are in stark contrast to Marx's theory on how capitalist labour conditions are experienced. I show how characteristics of the lifestyle television genre facilitate the representation of this fantasy of wholeness and the subsequent evocation of nostalgia. Furthermore, I illustrate how the didactic elements of the programme offer a space to imagine a sense of fulfilment through giving the impression of equipping the viewer with the practical knowledge of how to access a lifestyle that engages in enriching labour practices. Finally, my fifth chapter reflects on the complex and integral role that nostalgia plays in *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of rural lives and discusses how the work I have presented in this thesis may provide a basis for future ethnographic enquiries.

CHAPTER 2

AMERICAN WILDERNESS: CONSIDERING AMERICAN MYTHOLOGY, NOSTALGIA AND VISIONS OF 'FRONTIER LIFE'

Sometimes it's blood, sweat, and tears
On Alaska's last frontier
Life is simple, life is good
When you're living like you should
hey hey

Sometimes there's struggle, strife
Fathers, sons, brothers, wives
But we're making our way
Yes we'll stay right here
On Alaska's last frontier
(Kilcher feat. Jewel, 2012)

These are the lyrics of the theme song for *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, written and performed by Atz Kilcher and his daughter Jewel. The song is a manifesto for the family and subsequently a précis description of the programme. The song introduces the world of the Kilcher family, melodiously stating that their lifestyle is a challenge but that they are determined to remain living in Alaska despite the challenges because their life is “simple” and “good” and because they are living “like you should”. I began this chapter with the lyrics of the theme song because it also announces that the programme subscribes to the deep-rooted idealisation of the American frontier and wilderness, otherwise termed as the ‘frontier myth’ by William Cronon (1996, p. 78) and Richard Slotkin (1973, p. 5). *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reiterates the ideologies, values and actions on which the United States of America was founded and the dominant American identity built. Themes of the American frontier and wilderness recall powerful ideologies rooted in the establishment of the American nation and is inherent in present-day American identity. By reflecting on these long-standing ideals, the programme evokes a longing to reconnect with this lost rural past and regain the glory attributed to the frontiersmen for living in the wilderness (Cronon, 1996, pp. 77–78). This, of course, is an imaginatively constructed past.

In this chapter I will discuss how the images of the wilderness and a rudimentary way of life cultivate nostalgia for the apparently lost rural past. This leads me to explore perceptions of the wilderness and how the ‘frontier myth’ emerged. My study of frontier mythology relies

greatly on the extensive and rich works of William Cronon (1996), Roderick Nash (1982), Frederick Turner (1953) and Richard Slotkin (1973). However, as part of this exploration I also consider television's role in idealising the American wilderness, using Helen Wheatley's (2011) and Elke Weissmann's (2011) works to explain how lingering shots of spectacular wilderness imagery offers aesthetic pleasure and encourages an appreciation for natural environments. Dealing with a present-day context naturally leads me to the obvious contrast between the wilderness and urban development. I argue that television is one way in which nature and urbanity are combined and suggest that people use certain art forms to ignore the constructs of urbanity and industrialisation in an attempt to preserve the idea of natural environments. This discussion contributes to my argument that *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* images of wilderness and rural living respond to a nostalgic desire for simpler times and a return to America's pre-industrial past.

Defining Wilderness

'Wilderness' is a contested term that means different things to different people. American studies professor Leo Marx defines wilderness as "unaltered nature" (2008, p. 8). This definition is insufficient because one person's understanding of the term 'unaltered' can be different to another person's understanding. For some, there should be absolutely no trace of human existence for the area to be deemed a wilderness, and for others "minimal contact with man and his works does not destroy wilderness characteristics" (Nash, 1982, p. 4). Nash points out that there are also those who regard the mental criteria for deeming an area as 'the wilderness' just as important as the physical criteria. Some people need to know that civilization is not just around the corner. This leads to a tendency to categorize areas in terms of its degree of wilderness by determining how far the nearest shopping centre is, or whether there are mobile phone signals (1982, p. 4). Thus, the definition of wilderness relies very much on ideas of civilization and urbanity as its counterpoint. As Nash explains, "wilderness, in short, is so heavily freighted with meaning of a personal, symbolic, and changing kind as to resist any definition" (1982, p. 1). I subscribe to Nash's suggestion to "let the term [wilderness] define itself: to accept as wilderness those places people call wilderness" (1982, p. 5). In accepting this suggestion, Nash shifts the focus from what the wilderness is to what people "think it is" (1982, p. 1). In the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, I am interested in how 'wilderness' is

discursively constructed for viewers. I believe it best to establish how the programme represents the wilderness, always bearing in mind its tacit reflection of the historical American frontier and the frontier myth. It is from this basis that I can further explore how through images of the wilderness and a primitive lifestyle the programme cultivates nostalgia for a lost rural past.

In exploring what wilderness means in this project, I use the term 'primitive' as a means of describing the type of lifestyle that the American settlers lived and the characters on *Alaska: The Last Frontier* engage in. The term 'primitive' has a complex web of meanings, some of which are problematic in that it carries a connotation of inferiority between different ethnicities and cultures. In this study, however, I use the term in correlation with the philosophy of 'primitivism', stemming from the romantic movement that originated in Europe and eventually reached the shores of America by means of literature (Cronon, 1996, p. 76). This movement idealised the idea of primitivism and 'the sublime'; two concepts that encourage engagement with natural environments and discourage the experience of areas marked by industrialisation and urbanisation. Primitivism involves the rejection of modern civilization and deems natural environments as highly attractive and modern civilization as ugly and artificial (Cronon, 1996, p. 78). This philosophy proclaims that, "man's happiness and wellbeing decrease in direct proportion to his degree of civilization" (Nash, 1982, p. 47). Therefore, those who live primitively seek fulfilment in lifestyles that differ drastically from those in urban environments. I therefore use the term 'primitive' as a reference to the manifestation of this ethos. Although the frontier myth idealises primitivism, it is essentially teleological and eventually moves away from primitivism and refocuses on the establishment of civilization. However, in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, the idea of primitivism is perpetually reinforced and they never move toward the idea of embracing civilization. In doing this, the programme firmly establishes its ideology that living according to primitive ideals is more satisfying than living within the parameters of civilization, which also reinforces the reactionary message of the text for in essence these ideals oppose political and social progress.

My consideration of primitivism and the role it plays in conveying the frontier narrative through *Alaska: The Last Frontier* also leads me to discuss 'the sublime'. This concept is based on an enthusiasm for the wilderness. It is a romantic cultural construct that opposes the notion that

“beauty in nature was seen only in the comfortable, fruitful, and well-ordered” (Nash, 1982, p. 45). Cronon explains that it was believed God was most likely to be encountered in sublime landscapes, that is landscapes that were most rare and “one could not help feeling insignificant and being reminded of one’s own mortality” (1996, p. 73). Therefore, man and God could be more connected in the unpredictable, disordered and “unkempt” wild landscape, whereas the “meticulously ordered gardens at Versailles” were rejected due to their man-made design (Nash, 1982, p. 47). As Cronon explains, “God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset” (1996, p. 73), and that which was not touched by man was deemed Godlier. A ‘sublime landscape’ therefore refers to terrain that is not disturbed by the effects of humans and displays a quality of greatness and grandeur, unique in its wildness. Through the concept of sublimity, “wilderness never lost its harsh and forbidding character” but rather, a more positive understanding of the wilderness came into focus (Nash, 1982, p. 16). The romantic ideologies of primitivism and the sublime essentially encouraged and justified the American pioneers’ penetration of the New World, for the ‘uninhabited’ land required the individual to live primitively and therefore experience the sublimity of the wilderness. However, this also meant that romantic ideals encouraged colonial and imperial expansion, resulting in the oppression, genocide and relocation of the American Indians. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects these ideas of the sublime through presenting spectacular landscape imagery that showcases the Alaskan wilderness as exceptional. This imagery reinforces the idea of the wilderness eliciting exceptional qualities of self-reliance, ambition and strength to survive the harsh environment, which ostensibly leads to unprecedented freedom, thereby reinforcing popular political rhetoric of the ‘American Dream’.

Exploring frontier mythology and ideas of the wilderness means grappling with binary concepts such as ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery’. I use ‘civilization’ to distinguish between the uninhabitable wilderness and the inhabitable locations that humans have created. In referring to our contemporary context I use the term to describe environments marked by urbanisation and industrialisation. However, civilization also refers to what the frontiersmen were striving to achieve by taming the wild and placing it under human control. Once the wilderness was ‘civilized’, it meant that people were able to live relatively comfortably on the land and carry

out a particular standard of living. Fundamentally, civilization refers to “an advanced stage or system of human social development” (Soanes, 2002: 155), and during the frontier movement this meant that an individual showed “refinement”, and “good breeding” (Nash, 1982, p. 60), and accepted “social restraint on human behaviour” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 34). These qualities, of course, reflected European social standards. Within the boundaries of civilization people felt safe from the dangers of the uncivilized wilderness and those who were perceived as ‘uncivilized’. For the frontiersmen, wilderness was chaotic and in order for them to achieve civilization, they needed to subdue and tame it. In other words, the frontiersmen needed to be in control of the land and suppress its wildness for civilization to be achieved.

Like primitivism, ‘savagery’ is a term used in discussions of the American frontier to describe the antithesis of civilization. ‘Savage’ is defined as “(1) fierce and violent. (2) cruel and vicious. (3) uncivilized or primitive” (Soanes, 2002, p. 798). On account of their significantly different cultural practices, and the ‘threat’ they posed to the frontiersmen, the term ‘savage’ was also applied to the American Indians. However, as we can see in Nash’s work, the term ‘savagery’ is not always associated with the repudiation of the American Indians. The term also refers to ideas of primitivism, where the environment is characteristically savage and is simply not conducive to reflecting what the pioneers regarded as an advanced stage of human social development. In these cases, only those who “learn the endurance of nature” (Nash, 1982, p. 153), “lead a life of strenuous endeavour” (Nash, 1982, p. 150) and tap into the wilderness as a source of “virility” and “toughness” (Nash, 1982, p. 145) will succeed in triumphing “over the forces of raw nature” (Nash, 1982, p. 154). Naturally, in a wilderness environment these characteristics often involve engaging in an uncivilized manner and is identified as violence, ferocity, cruelty, or viciousness. Thus, in this context savagery refers to the ‘threatening’ American Indian people, but most prominently refers to an environment that elicits a particular set of savage characteristics for the purpose of survival. These ideas of civilization and savagery help define what wilderness means; however, they are terms derived from a particularly idealised and selective frontier narrative. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* preserves these ideas and uses them in a way that values the ideals of primitivism and savagery while devaluing the merits of civilization or urban and industrialised environments. The wilderness is portrayed as fierce, violent and uncivilized, but these characteristics are celebrated through the ideological lens of

primitivism. Therefore, the text puts forward these ideals and preserves the ideologies that form the basis of the exclusionary and prejudice narrative of the American frontier.

The frontier myth represents the wilderness as an area defined by the absence of urban development but not necessarily of human existence. On the one hand, the wilderness is represented as unruly and dangerous, where humans must learn how to adapt in order to survive; on the other hand, the wilderness is a place of sanctuary, freedom and purity (Nash, 1982, pp. 16–17). *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents the wilderness along a similar binary. The wilderness in which the Kilchers live appears completely free from any trace of urban development and civilization. The only man-made structures shown on the programme are the Kilchers' homes and other buildings needed for living self-sufficiently (barns, hunting cabins, green house tunnels). Like the frontiersmen, the Kilchers use the wilderness's resources for survival: Their buildings are predominantly built with lumber, they hunt and fish for meat, they use the grasslands for cattle grazing and they plant vegetables in the soil. The wilderness is therefore characterized as a place rich in resources for the survival of humans. The Kilchers depend on the resources of the wilderness for survival, but the wilderness does not depend on the presence of humans for its sustenance. To the frontiersmen, the wilderness was a place to escape the constraints of civilization, the past was abandoned and a "world of freedom" was entered (Cronon, 1996, p. 79). *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents the wilderness similarly to Cronon's description through its foundational story that frames the narrative of the show: The deceased Yule Kilcher abandoned the constraints of a European lifestyle and sought out a more peaceful existence, and found it in the wilderness of Alaska. The current Kilcher generations still aim to live according to Yule's ideals by eschewing modern industrial lifestyles and appearing to relive and restage their ancestors' initial pioneer encounters with the wilderness. The show represents the wilderness as a challenging arena but one which can routinely be tamed in order to service human needs.

An overarching characteristic of any Kilcher family member is their professed sense of freedom. The idea of 'freedom' is greatly important to ideologies of the American nation, having been imagined as 'the land of the free' since its inception. It is implied that by living in the wilderness without the constraints of civilization, the Kilcher family members have the freedom to act in any way they see fit. They have the freedom to build a new pasture without

planning permission or to relocate their cattle to better grasslands without being granted a permit. Therefore, the wilderness is represented as a place where someone gains total freedom, a place of happiness and success, and a place of peace and contentment. As Otto says, "This is pioneering, this is a continuum of building a homestead, and that's the most fun part; living a dream and passing it on to the next generation" (*Greener Pastures*, Season 4, Episode 6). The wilderness is represented as a place where one gains the freedom to live a dream, in the same way that the pioneers gained their freedom in establishing the new world of America.

However, the wilderness is not represented as a domesticated and pastoral setting, easily conquered and understood. Just as the frontiersmen had to learn to overcome the unruly and dangerous wilderness, so the Kilchers have to be cautious in their surroundings and understand the unpredictable nature of the wilderness. The programme conveys the message that the wilderness must be understood and respected in order to survive. In Episode 3 of Season 4 (*Spring Forward*), Atz-Lee and Jane hunt for a black bear. Atz-Lee coaches Jane on tracking a black bear and the need for whispering, crouching low and gaining a clear shot rather than injuring the bear near their campsite. The pair demonstrates an immense respect for the preservation of the wilderness and for the black bear. Instead of setting a trap or starting a wild fire to flush the bear out of the woods, Jane and Atz-Lee abandon their hunt, respecting the dangers of hunting a black bear. The wilderness is thus a place where people are not in control and must conform to the movements of the wild. This is a theme throughout Season 4. At the beginning of *A Mild Winter* (Season 4, Episode 1), the narrator states how relatively warm the Alaskan winter had been; this has drastically affected the routine of the Kilchers' environment. The weather patterns are unruly, the wildlife is unpredictable, and all of this can result in dangerous situations for the Kilchers. Therefore, although the wilderness is represented as a place of freedom and agency, it is also represented as a place of unruliness, ungoverned by the schedules of people.

The show is driven by this dialectic between control and lack of control and builds each narrative around the challenges between humans and nature. As a televisual text, however, these challenges never end and the Kilchers cannot conquer or tame the wilderness completely because the story continues. Essentially, the show is an ongoing drama between humans and

nature, which is very similar to the frontier myth that is repeated over and over again, resisting progress. This perpetual reflection of the frontier myth is indicative of the show's reactionary sentiments. The characters never reach a point where they have subdued the Alaskan wilderness and engage in civilizing nature as the frontiersmen, in fact, went on to do. Furthermore, this restaging of the frontier myth and its reactionary message is also manifest in the show's obsession with the narrative of one ancestor. The repetitive recitation of Yule's story is a reflection of the highly selective frontier narrative. The characters reiterate Yule's shunning of civilized society, his embrace of living a primitive lifestyle, and most importantly, his success in these endeavours and his gained freedom and fulfilment in this pursuit. Critically, the points emphasised in Yule's story are the very same points idealised in the frontier narrative. The show therefore uses Yule and his family as a representation of the greater American narrative. The family's history and their present-day context embodies the dominant ideas of the (highly selective) frontier myth and their supposed success in overcoming the wilderness. The show thus proffers the narrative out of which the American identity is said to have emerged and preserves what is thought to be America's origin story; an idea I will interrogate in the following sections.

Therefore, the wilderness that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents is first and foremost a space where urban development is completely absent, but human existence is possible. It is an unruly and dangerous place, but if humans are able to understand and respect the living entities of the wilderness, they will be able to access the rich resources that it holds. For people to survive in the wilderness, they must understand that the wilderness is not dependent on the survival of humans, but humans are dependent on the resources of the wilderness. Through the absence of urban development, the wilderness is also represented as a place where people experience freedom, happiness, success, peace and contentment. Therefore, the programme defines wilderness by using humanity's relationship to the wilderness.

Frontier Mythology, American Identity and Onscreen Representations of the Frontier

On the frontier line European pioneers became American, realizing that they had the opportunity to be free from the "bondage of the past" (Turner, 1953, p. 37) and could start afresh, carving their way through the wilderness and forming an American identity. Pioneers

were faced with the American wilderness and the only way to advance the line was to embrace the wilderness and eventually managing to tame areas for settlement. This intimate relationship between frontiersmen and the wilderness meant that the “wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth” (Cronon, 1996, p. 78). Without the wilderness, there was no frontier line and the image of the frontier was synonymous with images of the wilderness. Slotkin discusses how through various literary forms, an American myth emerged, providing a “compelling vision of the total American experience” (1973, p. 19). Slotkin defines a myth as follows:

Narrative formulation of a culture’s world view and self-concept, which draws both on the historical experience of that culture and on sources of feeling, fear, and aspiration (individual and universal/ archetypal) deep in the human subconscious and which can be shown to function in that culture as a prescription for historical action and for value judgement. (1973, p. 294)

America draws on the historical experience of the frontiersmen and their advancement of the frontier line through the harsh wilderness. The myth of the frontier declares that at the conception of America, the land was “wide-open”, with “unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 5). Therefore, the frontiersmen have been characterized as strong, ambitious, self-reliant individuals who succeeded in forcing their way through the wilderness and establishing the American nation.

Slotkin identifies three basic structural elements that seem to be used in the construction of a myth:

[1] a protagonist or hero, with whom the human audience is presumed to identify in some way; [2] a universe in which the hero may act, which is presumably a reflection of the audience’s conception of the world and the gods; [3] and a narrative, in which the interaction of hero and universe is described. (Slotkin, 1973, p. 8)

In the case of the American frontier myth, the protagonist is the frontiersmen. The audience identifies with the frontiersmen because he embodies the striking American characteristics that Turner describes (1953, p. 37). Slotkin explains, “the myth-hero embodies or defends the values of his culture in a struggle against the forces which threaten to destroy the people and

lay waste the land” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 269). The frontiersmen did not defend their various cultures but are said to have formed the American culture and identity. As the myth goes, the frontiersmen struggled against the wilderness that threatened their existence and created something to defend: The American identity. The universe element is the American wilderness that the frontiersmen initially encountered at the opening of the western frontier; it is a threat to the existence of the frontiersmen and their families if they did not tame portions of it for settlement. Finally, the narrative is that at the conception of America, the land was uninhabited (the wilderness) and offered “unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top” (the frontiersmen) (Slotkin, 1973, p. 5). The frontiersmen succeeds and is triumphant, and because of his ambitious struggle with the wilderness, the new world became the American nation and is considered successful and triumphant to this day. These perceptions justify historical and contemporary colonial and imperialist behaviour, validate the subjugation of other areas and cultures, and subsequently extends the notion of ‘American exceptionalism’. Within American borders, the frontier myth also supports the continuation of white Americans claiming a sense of ownership and indigeneity in America.

Alaska: The Last Frontier rehearses to the American frontier myth by presenting images of the wilderness and frontier living that reflect the highly idealised and exclusionary frontier narrative that America upholds as its origin story. Examining the development of this frontier mythology provides insight on how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* evokes a sense of longing for a seemingly lost American past and how its images of the wilderness and frontier living uses restorative nostalgia as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with the sociological norms of late capitalist urban life. Through subscribing to the American frontier myth, the programme conveys a reactionary message that portrays American values based on conservative ideals as far more fulfilling than the practices and ideals associated with urban living.

On one hand pioneers were from a refined world of tame existence and were gentle men and women distanced from savagery. On the other hand, they were rugged adventurers engaging in the exciting prospect of conquering the wilderness. This idea of inhabiting contrasting identities can be related to the dynamic between *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and its viewers. It offers the viewer an opportunity to inhabit the world of the Kilcher family and experience the

Alaskan wilderness and the challenges it bestows upon the characters. However, the difference is that the viewer engages in this alternative lifestyle from the comfort of their home and is not obligated to actually live out the lifestyle represented onscreen. This idea of escaping to an uncivilized world can also be read as a desire to evade environments, values and practices marked by the civilization of late capitalism. This suggests a dissatisfaction with late capitalist urban life. The viewer is therefore presented a context that allows for an imaginative escape from late capitalist life. This imagining is an ostensibly more fulfilling experience, though only momentary and in the mind's eye.

The frontier line was also a mixing pot of various nationalities coming together to explore the New World. There were significant differences between the European countries that the frontiersmen originated from and the vast American wilderness that they had opted to explore. The authority that was held over people in Europe was replaced with the opportunity for a person to master the "wilderness-jungle" and "impose his personal dream of self-aggrandizement on reality" (Slotkin, 1973, p. 34). The frontier was therefore not only a site for the transformation of the wilderness, it was also the place where the frontiersmen transformed from Europeans into Americans. This notion of transformation that was owed to being on the frontier line and facing the wilderness was supported by the romantic idea of primitivism. Cronon provides an example of how those who subscribed to the idea of primitivism perceived the wilderness and being in close proximity to it:

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are—or ought to be. (1996, p. 80).

The overarching idea that this description offers is that the wilderness provides a space of freedom to pursue authenticity. It implies that being a part of civilization causes an individual to wear a mask that hides one's true self from himself or herself. This also implies that the liberal capitalist values and practices of contemporary urban environments obstruct cognisance and access to the more fulfilling and authentic experience of primitive lifestyles and

conservative ideals. This notion is reflected in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* as the characters express their satisfaction in leading a self-sufficient life away from the more industrially developed lower 48 states. Near the end of Episode 19, Season 4 (*Hardcore Homesteading*) Otto's monologue alludes to the idea of gaining a sense of authenticity as he describes his homesteading lifestyle as a practice that makes him "engaged in life", which constantly makes him "in touch with [his] surroundings and constantly in touch with [his] neighbours". Though he describes this intense engagement as tiring, he also describes it as "endlessly rewarding". The idea of being engaged and in touch implies that Otto's awareness or understanding of his surroundings and those who surround him is not obscured in any way and that his relationships to these entities are authentic.

The idea of 'authenticity' is central to reality television's thematic concerns, which is professing to reflect real life. Cronon describes the wilderness as an enabler of authenticity as it dismantles one's bonds of civilization. Thus, the wilderness and living in the wilderness are particularly appealing subjects for reality television as they offer authentic reflections of contingency, random accident and conflict; all of which are prized in reality television discourse. These concepts of authenticity, however, do not acknowledge that personal authenticity is different for each person, which means that the term 'authenticity' is essentially nebulous and its definition amorphous. How does one know exactly when personal authenticity is discovered, or what authenticity really feels like? Cronon's description also neglects to address how true personal authenticity can only be discovered in the absence of preconceptions and biases. Preconceptions and biases hinder a person's free will and may therefore inhibit the discovery of authenticity for the individual. We all have preconceptions and biases, which therefore means that personal authenticity may be an impossible ideal to achieve. Identifying the problems with this perception of the wilderness shows precisely how romantic this perception is and establishes how the wilderness became an idealised image for many. Furthermore, Cronon problematizes his description of how those who subscribed to the idea of primitivism by pointing out that this kind of perception of the wilderness makes no space for those who need to "work the land to make a living" (1996, p. 80). This would have been the case for the pioneers, needing to use resources from the wilderness to sustain themselves. However, more importantly, the pioneers were essentially working the land so

that humans could build settlements, which would lead to civilization. Thus, they were not preserving the wilderness but initiating civilization. Regardless of Cronon's observation, the romantic idea of primitivism was relatable for the frontiersmen and offered validation for their lifestyle. In the same way, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* uses the romantic idea of primitivism by idealising the rejection of being a part of civilization yet using resources from the wilderness to build upon land that was once untouched. The Kilcher family's choice to turn away from American contemporary society and its lifestyle practices and to follow a more anachronistic lifestyle reminiscent of the American frontiersmen implies that the experience of late capitalist urban life is not as fulfilling and satisfying as rural living. The show's idealisation of the wilderness can therefore be read as an expression of dissatisfaction with late capitalist urban life, and it uses romanticised notions of authenticity and primitivism as a means to imply that progressive values have caused this dissatisfaction and a return to conservative practices and values would remedy this dissatisfaction.

With the birth of a new nationality, it was important that a national identity be constructed. The frontiersmen drew this identity from aspects of their environment that set them apart from other countries and "the search led to the wilderness" (Nash, 1982, p. 69). As Nash explains, no other known country in the early nineteenth century could match the wilderness of America. The American wilderness was considered exceptional and unique. Moreover, the ideas of the romantic movement complimented this realization, especially if the "wilderness was the medium through which God spoke most clearly, then America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe" (Nash, 1982, p. 69). The American character was built upon ideas such as these, linking the frontier to the origins of America. Therefore, it became the ideology that "to protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin" (Cronon, 1996, p. 77).

In the same vein, Turner writes a description of the American intellect and claims that it is because of the American frontier that Americans have these characteristics:

... to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy;

that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (1953, p. 37)

This description illustrates how interwoven the idea of the frontier and the American identity is. In Turner's description, there is no doubt that the frontier is exalted, and subsequently, the American character is considered superior to others. Seen in this way, Cronon explains that the wild country became the "quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be an American" (1996, p. 76). All aspects of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflect this perception of American identity. Not only does the Kilcher family live a primitive lifestyle, but their endless success in overcoming challenges directly caused through living in the wilderness reflects the idealised image of the dominant, powerful, practical, inventive, strong and effective frontiersman. It is highlighted in each narrative that it is these characteristics that ensure the success of the Kilchers in their pursuit to live self-sufficiently on the Alaskan frontier. Subsequently the narrative of the frontier myth is restored through these demonstrations of frontier living and ultimately perpetuate this idea of what it means to be American.

Absent from these considerations is the American Indian culture that existed long before the arrival of the pioneers and most certainly before they established the new nation of America. Anthropologist Russell Thornton describes the American Indian historical narrative as historically ignored, unrecognised and unwritten (1987, p. xv). The exception to this truth would be the representation of American Indians in the western film genre of film, television and literature where they are generally portrayed as part of a hostile nature to be conquered. In essence, the frontiersmen established a 'new' nationality on top of an existing people-group who already had their own cultural identity. These truths detract attention from the heroism of the frontiersmen and have therefore been excluded from the American narrative. This exclusionary narrative and *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* preservation of it, continues to justify the predominant construction of America as a nation of settlers.

According to Slotkin, the tension between the pioneers and the American Indians stemmed from cultural differences pertaining to their perceptions of the wilderness environment that they both inhabited. He describes it as follows:

The Europeans were met by native Indian cultures ... whose vision of the American landscape was mythopoeic rather than conventional, whose values and mores (derived from their environment and their mythic vision) were in important respects antagonistic to those of Europe. (Slotkin, 1973, p. 25)

Thus, even though the two cultures experienced the same wilderness environment, tension grew because their understanding of the environment differed: “Where the settlers could see only chaos and wilderness, the Indian’s eye and mind could construe an order, a kindred intelligence in all things” (Slotkin, 1973, p. 27). In other words, American Indians revered the wilderness and did not intend to obliterate it. The pioneers on the other hand perceived the wilderness as unruly and harsh, an entity that needed to be tamed. R.W.B. Lewis explains that the American Indian became the “representative of that harsh and deceptive world” (1959, p. 169) which, according to historian Richard Drinnon, meant that the American Indian was reduced “to the level of the rest of the fauna and flora to be ‘rooted out’” (1990, p. xxvi). These antithetical perceptions of the wilderness meant that the two cultures were pitted against each other.

Rather than unite in their endeavours to survive in the wilderness and construct an inclusive identity with the indigenous American Indians, Slotkin describes how the settlers took another path:

It was far easier to define their cultural identity by negative means, through attacking or condemning alien elements in their society ... The Indian wars, in which culture was pitted against culture, afforded a perfect opportunity for this sort of definition by repudiation. (Slotkin, 1973, p. 22)

Drinnon echoes this as he explains how the American Indians were defined as “nonpersons within the settlement culture” (1990, p. xxvii). He describes this hatred as an “enabling experience” for the rise of the American empire as it helped the settler “wrest a continent and more from the hands of [the] native caretaker of the land” (1990, pp. xxvii–xxviii). In other words, the hatred helped to justify the genocide and land-theft that ensued.

Despite these truths, writers sought to boost support for the frontier by “glossing over the obviously perilous realities of the pioneer’s situation” and generated a narrative where “the

myth-hero embodies or defends the values of his culture in a struggle against the forces which threaten to destroy the people and lay waste the land” (Slotkin, 1973, pp. 268–269). The forces that threaten to destroy predominantly referred to entities found in the wilderness and included American Indians. Thus, the frontiersmen took on the role of the hero in the narratives and the American Indians were given the role of the antagonist. These narratives led to the construction of a frontier myth that largely ignored the significance of the American Indian in the establishment of America and portrayed the frontiersmen as America’s founders. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* projects this erasure of the American Indian narrative and in a sense illustrates Slotkin’s observation. Though the programme recalls ideas of a frontier lifestyle, there is no reference to any other culture group previously or currently occupying Alaskan land. Critically, Alaska was part of the northern frontier movement, and in this case the indigenous people who already inhabited the land were treated differently to those on the western frontier. Nash explains that during the northern frontier movement and the wars between frontiersmen and American Indians “no such systematic extinguishing of native interest occurred” (1982, p. 276). He explains what happened at the northern frontier as follows:

The Eskimos and Indians of the northern frontier were never fought, hence never conquered, and never made to sign treaties relinquishing their rights to the land. The natives were simply ignored for a century after the United States’ 1867 purchase of Russia’s interest in Alaska. (Nash, 1982, p. 276).

Thus, in Alaska, there was not a violent erasure of indigenous interests, but rather a passive disregard for them. Although there were no endeavours to erase indigenous cultures in Alaska, the fact remains that the pioneers were not the first to inhabit the land. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* does not acknowledge this fact. The programme is more reminiscent of an American frontier narrative and demonstrates an understanding of the wilderness that is clearly derived from an exclusionary narrative of American values based on conservative ideals. The show essentially continues this historic disregard and figuring of native people as non-persons through its erasure of their history.

The closing of the American frontier in 1890 (Marx, 2008, p. 8) meant that civilization had grown and the intimate relationship between frontiersmen and the wilderness would not be a necessity anymore. This provoked “many Americans to seek ways of retaining the influence of

wilderness in modern civilization” and the Boy Scout movement was one of the efforts toward retaining the wilderness as an influence (Nash, 1982, p. 142). Nash argues that “... civilized man actually misses contact with the wild world. Deprived of the physical challenge of surviving through his own abilities, he feels frustrated, unhappy, and vaguely repressed” (Nash, 1982, p. 265), and to remedy this, the wilderness is sought out. This negotiation between civilization and a frontier mentality manifested itself on screen through the western genre. John Lenihan contends that for America, “no genre has retained more continuous popularity than has the Western” and that no other genre has been “more involved with fundamental American beliefs about individualism and social progress” (1980, p. 4). The genre’s origins lie in literature, and in her writing about the depiction of landscapes in the western, Megan McGilchrist explains how Hollywood took the “mythic imagery” of the genre and gave it “iconic status”, creating an alternate reality that took over from real events and became the accepted history of the West” (McGilchrist, 2011, p. 14). In other words, western films gave form to the narrative of the frontier myth and offered viewers visual representations of what is understood as America’s origin. Needless to say, the narratives of these films included significant distortions of the frontier myth, depicting antagonistic American Indians and the ever-successful frontiersmen, or cowboy. Michael Budd identifies how the films also dealt with the conflicting ideas surrounding the frontier: “civilization and savagery, culture and nature, East and West, settlement and wilderness” (1976, p. 62). In doing this, the films gave “definite form” to these “abstract themes and concepts” and provided images “with which to visualize and particularize the meanings latent in these abstract elements” (Budd, 1976, p. 62). Thus, the western became a genre that was helpful to the viewer to negotiate between the civilization and a frontier mentality, offering the viewer an opportunity to engage with the ideals and ideas of the frontier yet remain safely within civilization.

Over time, the western has moved from literature and film to include television programmes such as *The Lone Ranger* (1949–1957), *Gunsmoke* (1955–1975), *Cheyenne* (1955–1963), *Rawhide* (1959–1965) and *Bonanza* (1959–1973), which embody the characteristics of the western film genre. However, contemporary television programmes also embody the ideals of the frontier myth in a relatively new and interesting way. Rather than reflecting the frontier myth through a fictional narrative using trained actors and actresses, these programmes

present normal people demonstrating the ideals of the frontier myth while in a wilderness setting. *Naked and Afraid* (2013–), *Naked and Afraid XL* (2015–), and *Dual Survival* (2010–) are reality television programmes about American people choosing to live for a period of time in various wilderness settings. In these types of programmes, the primary goal is for the characters to survive by living off the land and constructing shelters from natural resources. A subsidiary goal is for the characters to thrive in the wilderness setting (as the frontiersmen did) and to establish whether or not they would be able to live in the wilderness permanently if they chose to. Through the reality television mode, these programmes present an even more apparently authentic representation of the frontier myth and accentuate the conflicting concepts of civilization and savagery, offering the viewer a (seemingly) realistic portrayal of living primitively.

These shows appear to demonstrate a continuity with Nash's ideas about the desire to incorporate wilderness into contemporary civilization. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* shares the characteristics of these types of television programmes, although the characters have already committed to living a more primitive lifestyle and are continuously succeeding in their endeavours. Rather than presenting characters that are endeavouring to recapture a frontier mentality, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents characters that have already reconnected with the wilderness and are clearly thriving in this lifestyle, although they face the continued challenge of surviving the wild. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers the opportunity to connect with a natural environment and uses imagery to access an imaginative space where urbanity and the wilderness are not so separated. The show offers a perceptual and somewhat physical escape to a natural setting. Obviously, the viewer is not able to climb through the television screen and escape to the Alaskan wilderness; however, the programme does offer the viewer an opportunity to engage with each episode and be immersed in a distant natural setting. Contributing to this sense of detachment from reality are the regular aerial shots of the Alaskan wilderness that the programme presents. Helen Wheatley's discussion on landscape imagery in television programmes leads her to note the popularity of landscape subjects in fine art. From a Marxist position she cites that "landscape art acts as a response to an increasingly urbanised or technologically mediated world" (2011, p. 240). This suggests that people use landscape art as a form of rejecting or ignoring the constructs of urbanity and industrialisation

by attempting to preserve the idea of natural environments. Thus, fine art may well be a source used for connecting with natural environments and the imagery can be used to access an imaginative space. In a sense, the shots of the wilderness function in the same way as landscape art. They provide images of unadulterated wilderness and offer the viewer a visual escape from anything related to humanity. Furthermore, these types of shots relate to Elke Weissmann's description of 'contemplative shots' as they offer "temporal moments of silence" that allow for an appreciation for and reflection on their differences from contrasting environments, such as urbanity. Following Weissmann, I argue that in this "contemplated" space, viewers are given moments to engage with nostalgia for a lost wild past.

The overarching frontier myth perpetuated by the programme highlights how the urban environment has discarded the lifestyle of the frontiersmen. The frontiersmen's lifestyle is idealised as the origin of the American nation, a 'homely' environment. In viewing this homely environment onscreen, its absence in urbanity becomes more pronounced, which in turn cues nostalgia. Most obviously, the characters engage in Svetlana Boym's 'restorative nostalgia' through recreating and demonstrating the practices, struggles, triumphs and ideologies encountered or held by the frontiersmen in a wilderness setting. Moreover, the characters engage in restorative nostalgia as they preserve the narrative from which America's identity is procured. Furthermore, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* exemplifies restorative nostalgia by presenting a selective text that fails to represent or even acknowledge certain truths of the past. What is shown onscreen is a tremendously filtered representation of what it means to live a frontier life.

The Restaging of America's Frontier Myth in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*

America continues to use the frontier myth as a way of establishing itself as a national community. Slotkin notes that "as long as the nation-state remains the prevalent form of social organization, something like a national myth/ideology will be essential to its operations" (1998, p. 654). The narrative of the frontier may be antiquated, however, its values of freedom and ownership correlate with contemporary late capitalist discourse. With the capitalist preference for free-market competition and the importance placed on individual private property ownership, the frontier ideals translate into our contemporary context. In *Alaska: The Last*

Frontier, these ideals are represented by freedom and ownership being performed on the land. From this position of ownership, the Kilchers are able to live out other ideals associated with the frontier narrative. The programme narrates the frontier myth through continuously dramatizing features of the narrative to its viewers and subsequently preserves an idealised image of American history. The nostalgia evoked is therefore restorative as the show does not take cognisance of America's violent or oppressive past and exchanges accuracy for a particularly romantic representation of frontier living.

The application of Slotkin's basic structural elements in the construction of a myth (1973, p. 8) are useful to show how the programme reflects the frontier myth. These elements form the basis of how the programme communicates a very specific and idealised vision of rural living. From these foundations, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* also uses ideas of sublimity and primitivism to promote a frontier way of life that play on a nostalgic sensibility to reconnect with the wilderness and therefore reconnect with the idea of what it means to be American.

In *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, there are multiple protagonists but I would like to suggest that Yule Kilcher, the deceased patriarch who originally relocated to Alaska, is the true protagonist. Although deceased, the memories of Yule held by the family are regularly shared with the viewers. Old footage of Yule and his family are also incorporated into numerous episodes and some of his equipment are still used on the Kilcher homestead. He became a frontiersman by carving out a place of settlement in the American wilderness for his family and establishing a self-sufficient lifestyle that the family live by to this day. The frontiersmen established the foundation of America, and Yule established the foundation of the Alaskan Kilcher family. Essentially, Yule represents the myth of the American frontiersmen. The intentional incorporation of Yule into the narrative is fundamental to the show's restorative operations. By attempting to return to Yule's lifestyle, the show creates a synergy between the American frontier myth and *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and directly attempts to restore a frontier lifestyle. The Kilcher family members who currently live in Alaska are also protagonists of the programme. Each family member strives to live a self-sufficient lifestyle and drives the narrative of each episode forward by demonstrating their daily or seasonal tasks. The participants are potentially relatable to the viewers because they appear to live simultaneously with the viewers, much like soap opera characters who share the rhythms of daily life with

their audiences. Significant holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas are celebrated on the programme. The Kilchers celebrate these holidays in ways that differ from a consumerist culture (synonymous with urbanity); however, the fact that both the viewer and the Kilcher characters are celebrating the same holiday, means that the viewer is able to identify with the Kilchers on a personal level. The viewer is made aware that the Kilcher family will be enjoying their Thanksgiving dinner at approximately the same time as their family enjoys their Thanksgiving dinner. Identifying that the Kilcher family and the viewer exist simultaneously means that the lifestyle of the Kilchers seems more attainable than if they lived in an alternative period. These images are illustrative of Roger Silverstone's suggestion that television is everyday life and that "to study the one is at the same time to study the other" (1989, p. 77). His discussions focus on how television programmes generally present content that mirrors the everyday life of the viewers, with specific attention to images of "home, homemaking and domesticity" (Silverstone, 1994, p. 32). Silverstone uses the term 'ordinariness' to refer to the "more or less secure normality of everyday life" that the programmes present, "which are sociologically and culturally differentiated by region or nation" (1994, p. 166). These images can be a "highly ideological resource for individual and domestic identity formation within the home" (Silverstone, 1994, p. 32), however, they still resemble a particular image of American ordinariness that the viewers can identify with. This characteristic enables the viewer to relate to the protagonists of the programme and identify with the tasks or celebrations depicted onscreen.

The 'universe' of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is the Alaskan wilderness. Nash describes Alaska as "that of a wilderness mecca, a qualitatively wilder country than any that exists or, perhaps, ever existed in the lower forty-eight states" (Nash, 1982, p. 275). The Alaskan wilderness is understood as yet-to-be-tamed by human development, and because of its extreme weather patterns, "Alaska is unquestionably less subject to human control and modification" (Nash, 1982, p. 275). Thus, Alaska is seemingly the closest remaining piece of wilderness that one can compare to the wilderness of the frontiersmen. Just as the frontiersmen had carved out settlements in the wilderness, so did the Kilcher family. Indeed, the Kilchers do not intend to conquer the whole of Alaska, therefore the focus of the programme is not on their movement through Alaska but on how they sustain themselves by using the surrounding wilderness for

survival. Additionally, the title of the programme underlines that the universe of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is deemed a frontier. This in itself draws parallels between the programme and the frontier myth, suggesting that this is the last vestige of the frontier and the freedom it symbolises.

The Kilchers demonstrate the narrative of the frontier myth by aiming to be strong, ambitious and self-reliant. Every challenge met is always conquered through means of ambition and self-reliance. Their extensive knowledge about how to survive in the Alaskan wilderness also leads to their success. Thus, the Kilchers thrive in their universe, demonstrating the mythological narrative of the frontier. Essentially Yule's story replaces the complex and violent narrative of America's history and replaces it with a singular narrative about someone embracing the wilderness. Instead of acknowledging the violent erasure of American Indian interests and the intricacies of how America came to be, the programme establishes Yule as the foundation of the programme's universe and an American sensibility. The frontier myth conveys a decidedly simplified and idealised version of the true American narrative; however, Yule's story further simplifies the myth by only focusing on the Kilcher family and their unwavering success and by placing whiteness as central to an ideal American identity.

Sublime Imagery: Reiterations of Frontier Ideologies Through the Showcasing of the Alaskan Landscapes

The romantic ideas of sublimity and primitivism have shaped today's perceptions of the American wilderness and its associations with ideas of exceptionalism and living the American dream. The programme uses three types of aerial shots to illustrate the grandeur of the wilderness and the insignificance of humans in comparison. Firstly, there are aerial shots that display the enormity of the wilderness with no signs of human presence. The wilderness exists independently of humans and retains its grandeur naturally, without human intervention. These shots also represent the rarity of the Alaskan wilderness, which is not found in any other American state. The unfettered snow-capped mountains, raging rivers, lush grasslands, towering forests, the deep Pacific Ocean and roaming wildlife are all sublime images of an Alaskan wilderness in summer and far from human civilization. These aerial shots are either static or gliding over the terrain. The camera movement over the wilderness gives an eagle eye

effect, soaring without restraint. This camera movement reflects the freedom that the frontier myth advocates and showcases the expanse of the Alaskan wilderness.

Helen Wheatley writes about the mode of landscape programming in British television and identifies a glut of programmes that dwell on landscape imagery (2011, p. 234). She describes this landscape imagery as a “veritable feast of rolling hills and dramatic coastline, all accompanied by soaring orchestral scores and state-of-the-art HD aerial photography” (2011, p. 235). This ‘spectacular television’, as Wheatley terms it, creates a “nostalgic, ‘heritage’ image of an ‘unspoilt Britain’ entirely devoid of urban space or industrialization” (2011, pp. 233–235). She establishes that the intention of presenting spectacular images of unfettered landscapes at various points in an episode is to “halt the narrative progression of programmes ... in order to appeal to a *contemplative viewer* who appreciates a televisual form of landscape spectacle on an aesthetic level” (2011, pp. 241–242). In other words, the spectacular landscape imagery “asks the viewer to look rather than to follow narration or dialogue”, which gives an opportunity for contemplation (2011, p. 244). As mentioned earlier, Elke Weissmann also discusses this tendency for certain shows to linger on natural imagery and calls them ‘contemplative shots’. She argues that these shots “present moment[s] of aesthetic pleasure” (2011, p. 206) and create “a temporal moment of silence” (Weissmann, 2011, p. 202). In these moments a space is created for the viewer “to reflect on the knowledge gained so far, and allow a moment of contemplation” (Weissmann, 2011, p. 196). Weissmann explains that the images distance the viewer from the information and emotion of the narrative and through being offered a space for contemplation, the viewer is allowed to “create a link between personal story and public debate” (2011, p. 196). In other words, these moments of contemplation allow for an assimilation of what has already been presented in the episode and understand how the information relates to contemporary urban lifestyles.

The aerial shots used in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflect this type of landscape imagery. During these shots the narratives of the episode halt for a moment and the viewer is offered an opportunity to contemplate the spectacular images of the Alaskan wilderness. These shots ask the viewer to look at sublime wilderness landscapes with no distraction and enable the viewer to contemplate its enormity and the obvious absence of the “urbanized and technologically mediated world” (Wheatley, 2011, p. 240). These images of unadulterated American landscape

create a nostalgic image because they are clearly reminiscent of a period before the introduction of urban space and industrialisation. Thus, the aerial images used in the programme recall ideas of pre-industrialised America and facilitate nostalgia's comparative function in response to the reality of late capitalist urban living.

The second type of aerial shot used incorporates both the wilderness and the presence of people or man-made structures. These shots highlight the insignificance of humans when situated in the enormous wilderness. The shots are often used when characters are travelling by four-wheeler or horse. The camera will be in an aerial position, tracking the characters but also displaying how small they are in relation to the wilderness. This also highlights the human dependence on the wilderness in the Kilchers' situation. The Kilchers need to travel in order to survive; the wilderness does not need anything from the Kilchers. Additionally, there are aerial shots of the Kilcher homesteads that situates their man-made structures within the wilderness environment. Just like the portrayal of humans, their structures are also portrayed as tiny in the midst of the forestry and terrain surrounding them. These images reinforce the notion of the wilderness as sublime as they highlight the enormity and grandeur of the wild while diminishing the human presence. Through these images it is clear that the magnificence of the wilderness has nothing to do with human inhabitants. Additionally, in the absence of any other human presence or structures, the programme draws attention to how this environment is so very different from any other, especially urban environments, and therefore implies that for the wilderness to remain sublime, urbanity should stay at bay.

Thirdly, a digital map is used across the series to illustrate where 'this week's' stories will play out. This map is viewed from an aerial point of view and demonstrates the vast distances between the locations of narratives in an episode. For example, in Season 4, Episode 5 (*Loaded for Bear*) a narrative about Atz-Lee and Jane hunting at the head of Kachemak bay unfolds. A portion of this narrative comes to an end and there is a cut to an aerial map of the area. The narrator explains: "Thirty miles away, back on the homestead, Atz-Lee's uncle, Otto, welcomes two new bulls to the cattle yard". Simultaneous to the narrator's explanation, the map is focused on the location of the head of the bay and then moves toward the location of Otto and Charlotte's homestead. While the image of the map is not necessarily sublime in itself, it supports the idea of the Alaskan wilderness being immense. Rather than the narrator stating

that Otto and Charlotte's homestead is 30 miles away and then cutting to footage of the homestead, the map provides visual evidence that 30 miles is a long distance and over wild terrain. The use of the map also demonstrates how isolated Atz-Lee and Jane are from other humans.

In Episode 2 of Season 4 (*Moving Toward the Future*), all three of these aerial shots are used consecutively to accentuate the vastness of the wilderness needing to be crossed by Atz-Lee in order to survive. Simultaneously, the narrator and Atz-Lee provide information about the terrain and the importance of his journey to the head of the bay. Each shot used emphasises the sublimity of the Alaskan wilderness and how small and vulnerable Atz-Lee is.

The narrator begins this section by explaining: "A mile across the homestead two generations of Kilchers are forced into action by the rising temperatures". At the same time, there is a moving aerial shot over forestry. The camera flies over the trees and tilts upward, keeping the forestry in the foreground and revealing Kachemak Bay in the middle of the frame and snow-capped mountains in the background. The segment cuts to a long-shot of Atz-Lee driving a four-wheeler over rough terrain with snow-capped mountains in the background. The narrator continues: "Otto's nephew, Atz-Lee, sets out on a mission to meet ∕ his father and brother at the head of the bay, a 30-mile journey to the ∕ valley that is vital for the Kilcher's lifestyle". Within this sentence, there are two cuts to different aerial shots, indicated by an underlined slash (∕). The first slash indicates a cut to an aerial shot of the digital map, showing how far Atz-Lee must travel to the head of the bay. This demonstrates that the 30 miles he needs to travel is not on a man-made road but over difficult terrain. The second slash indicates the second cut to a moving aerial shot swooping toward the valley that the narrator speaks of. This shot provides a 'real-life' display of the location that Atz-Lee is travelling toward. In this shot there is forestry in the foreground, the valley in the middle of the frame and snow-capped mountains in the background. Thus, the immense expanse of the wild terrain is illustrated once more.

An extreme high-angle shot shows Atz-Lee driving the four-wheeler over the rough terrain again. There is forestry and mountains in the background and snow-capped mountains in the distant background. During this shot, Atz-Lee provides a voice-over saying, "Its crucial to get up there for fishing, hunting, range-riding; our livelihood is up in that valley". Atz-Lee's voice-over brings a sense of urgency to the scene and introduces the dependency of the Kilchers on

their wilderness environment. They must be able to access the valley in order to survive. The shot that accompanies the voice-over reflects the subtext of Atz-Lee's voice-over: The enormity and richness of the wilderness is far greater than the size of a human. Thus, this shot reinforces the notion of the wilderness as sublime. The extreme high-angle exhibits the enormity of the snow-capped mountains and forestry and the expansive terrain that Atz-Lee must cross. It also asks the viewer to contemplate the sheer sublimity of the wilderness and Atz-Lee's journey by taking a step back to an extreme high-angle shot that puts the narrative into perspective, illustrating the seemingly boundless wilderness terrain. The shot showcases the unfettered Alaskan landscape and proves to the viewer that Atz-Lee is completely immersed in the wilderness and urbanity is nowhere in sight. Atz-Lee continues to explain the situation at the head of the bay and why it is essential that they be able to access the valley:

Getting around at the head of the bay is difficult. There's a lot of rivers, a lot of little tributary streams, creeks, going into it and then on top of that you have these extreme tides that are coming up all the way across all these flats. So, last year my Dad came up with this idea to build a bridge to give us better access up into the valley.

Various moving aerial shots intersperse Atz-Lee's explanation, displaying exactly what he is describing: rivers, tributaries, streams, creeks and flats. Rather than using contrasts between sound and image, sound tends to reinforce image and underlines precisely how difficult it is to reach the head of the bay. Finally, he explains that his father needed to intervene in this difficult situation and build a bridge. With the combination of Atz-Lee's explanation and the various shots illustrating his explanation, the scene ends with the characters needing to construct a device in order to overcome the unruliness of the wilderness. The wilderness thus emerges as unmanageable without human intervention. The sublime wilderness is dominant and humans are inferior to the power of nature. For the characters to carry on pursuing a self-sufficient lifestyle, the bridge must be built. This message reflects one of the primary messages of the frontier myth: The frontiersmen were victorious in their pursuits to overcome the wilderness. A frontier way of life ostensibly elicits exceptional qualities from the characters, implying that experiencing the wilderness and trying to survive in this unpredictable environment brings out a set of characteristics that are remarkably superior. The Kilchers demonstrate the characteristics of Turner's 'true American' and because of these

characteristics, they succeed. Through using their “strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness”, their “practical, inventive turn of mind” and their “masterful grasp of material things” (Turner, 1953, p. 37), the characters overcome their problem and succeed in their pursuit to survive in the wilderness. This representation of the true American character reinforces the notions of American exceptionalism and preserves the idea of frontier values and practices holding the key to freedom and success. It is also clear that the wilderness is central to the evocation of these qualities, implying that the sublimity and primitiveness of frontier living awakens an extraordinary character that is unlikely to be awakened through urban living. Thus, the show proffers reactionary sentiments through preserving a specifically antiquated image of American life that portrays the wilderness and primitive practices as far more connected to the ideals of being a true American.

Thus, through the use of high-angle and aerial shots and voice-overs and narration, this scene illustrates how the sublimity of the wilderness is represented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. The spectacular forestry, rivers and mountains are showcased continuously, highlighting their magnificence and offering an idyllic image of the Alaskan wilderness. Furthermore, these images display the insignificance of human presence in the wilderness and how humans are dependent on the resources that the wilderness provides. Additionally, the scene reflects the frontier myth in that it excludes acknowledgement of the American Indian population who were indigenous to the Alaskan wilderness. With the images of the wilderness and the topic of accessing resources in the valley, it would be natural for the characters, or the narrator, to discuss how the Ninilchik tribe, among others, may have accessed the valley or how they used the resources. However, just as the frontier myth ignores the narrative of the American Indians, so does *Alaska: The Last Frontier*.

The frontier myth is further reiterated in this scene through the representation of the Kilcher family successfully living in the wilderness. The scene offers an example of how the programme presents characters that embody the frontier characteristics of self-reliance and ambition, which are implied to guarantee success. The repair and readjustment of the bridge is no small task and it requires strength and ambition to approach this challenge. Once again, the characters encounter a difficult task, and once again, they succeed in achieving their goal by using their strength of knowledge, self-reliance, and ambition. Therefore, the ever-triumphant

image that the frontier myth projects of the frontiersmen is reflected through the ceaseless success of the Kilcher family in their endeavours. Frontier mythology is clearly used in this instance to reinforce popular political rhetoric of the American dream that prizes ideas of individualism and meritocracy by foregrounding the remarkable success of the Kilcher family as a result of their hard work and perseverance, seldom focusing on instances of struggle or failure to succeed.

This scene also represents how the show makes it appear that the characters do not try to alter the wilderness in order to survive. Atz and his sons work around the patterns of nature by repairing a bridge that enables them to access the valley. Thus, the course of the river is not disturbed, and the characters are able to access an essential area for their survival. This scene offers an illustration of how, overall, the programme shows that humans and the wilderness can live side-by-side without encumbering one another. There is a positive environmental message in this illustration. While the show represents conservative sentiments it also offers interesting critiques of urban life and capitalist ways of being by showing a more symbiotic approach to people living alongside nature. These images stand in stark contrast to the dynamic of urban environments where humans and the wilderness cannot exist unhindered side-by-side. For urbanity to exist, portions of the wilderness must be obliterated to provide space for industrial construction. Likewise, for there to be unencumbered wilderness, there should be no trace of urbanity. One may suggest that the two entities may exist side-by-side successfully, however according to Cronon, this would mean that the sublime wilderness becomes domesticated, losing the wild and substituting it for elements of nature found in urbanity (1996, p. 75). For example, inner-city parks or flower baskets hanging from lampposts could be considered as elements of the wild existing alongside urban structures. However, they do not reflect the idea of the sublime wilderness that is represented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, nor do they reflect the wilderness that the frontiersmen encountered.

Through exhibiting the sublimity of the wilderness, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* calls forth the romantic ideas of the superiority of nature in comparison to civilization. The ideals of the frontier myth are also underscored by displaying the idealistic environment in which the frontiersmen achieved their success. Yet, for those in urban environments this idealised relationship between humans and the sublime wilderness seem lost. Out of this sense of loss,

nostalgia may emerge, initiating a yearning for what is thought to be lost. These 'lost' encounters with the sublime wilderness is ostensibly what *Alaska: The Last Frontier* provides through its languorous evocations of space and freedom and by offering the opportunity to access the sense of self-reliance, ambition and strength that is arguably lost to the urbanite.

Learning How to Live Primitively: *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* Didactic Address

The obvious contentment of the characters in the programme implies that living a primitive lifestyle will yield success, personal fulfilment and the freedom that the frontiersmen once had. For the urban viewer, these images hold the potential to cultivate nostalgia as they present visual representations of the fulfilling primitive lifestyle that the frontiersmen lead; the type of lifestyle that seems to be lost within an urban environment. Thus, these representations of primitive living support reactionary sentiments that suggest conservative values of individualism and self-reliance will lead to personal fulfilment and the realization of freedom. It is the sense of freedom, success and fulfilment associated with the American character that cultivates a yearning for a rural lifestyle and the recovery of what seems to have been lost through industrialisation and the development of urbanity.

Nostalgia, as Boym describes it, "is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2001, Introduction, para. 3). It is not necessarily an actual location, but more a yearning to recover the sense of being emotionally comfortable. Likewise, the frontier myth is a fantasy that Americans project on their past. The narrative of the myth is comforting rather than realistic; however, it provides nostalgic Americans with idealistic material they can yearn for. Boym also argues that it is possible to be vicariously nostalgic, claiming ideas and images of 'home' that are not part of one's past (2001, Conclusion, para. 22). These ideas and images become symbols of the nostalgic person's past even though they may never have existed or may be distorted.

The programme provides perceptible examples of the 'home' and demonstrations of a primitive lifestyle. Each task or challenge that the Kilchers encounter on the programme is dealt with in a way that involves the viewer: A character explains the task or challenge and then explains the proposed approach, followed by a demonstration of the proposed approach. In doing this the programme offers clear examples of a more primitive lifestyle than urban areas

allow for, and the viewer is able to engage with the idea of primitivism. For example, in Season 4 Episode 17 (*Snowy Roundup*), Atz and Bonnie visit the Willard Cabin to restock supplies for the winter months. The primary task is to ensure that the cabin has enough dry firewood to last for a year. Atz explains to the camera that “there’s not many dead trees left close to the cabin so for a year or two down the road I’m going to girdle some trees”. In this way Atz informs the viewer of his planned course of action, and essentially involves the viewer in the scene. The viewer has been made privy to the planned course of action, and Atz then provides his reasons for girdling trees:

So I’m just going to cut the bark all the way around so it doesn’t get any more moisture. Moisture goes from the roots up to feed the tree along the bark and the cambium layer. Well, if you girdle it and cut the bark through that cambium layer around the tree, no more nutrition can go up and eventually the tree just dies from dehydration. I’ll do a few of these and next year they’ll be dry.

This information is not necessarily required for the viewer to have a basic understanding of the onscreen action; however, it further involves the viewer in the scene because the viewer now understands Atz’s reasons and can follow the ensuing actions more closely. Atz proceeds to use his chainsaw to cut the trees and demonstrates how to girdle. Afterward, he chops firewood with Bonnie and explains their next step:

Now it’s time to go take care of the inside stuff, which is maybe smaller but may be more life-saving. A lot of people have had to hold up there to take shelter and the code of the north is to leave the door open, have a fire ready to go, have some food in there, some warm clothes.

Here, the viewer is offered a broader explanation of why it is important to restock the cabin, which gives Atz and Bonnie’s task more meaning. As Atz places wood in the cabin’s fireplace he explains that “it’s kind of an old-fashioned thing I think. A lot of people don’t do this anymore and it’s probably one of the nicest things you can do to anybody”. Again, weight is added to the meaning of this task and the viewer is informed of the benefits of preparing dry firewood and restocking a small cabin in the Alaskan wilderness. On completion of this task, the couple pack up their belongings and leave the cabin while Atz’s voice-over expresses his feelings on the task:

I love these kinds of trips. You accomplish everything you go to do and you feel like you did something really important, you feel like everything is put to bed, kids are all asleep, I can go to bed for the winter. It's a good feeling.

This is an appreciation for the goals he was able to achieve and the viewer is invited to share in Atz's appreciation. This appreciation also highlights Atz's fulfilment and success that he gains in pursuing a rural lifestyle, which therefore reflects the benefits of primitivism. Although the viewer is not physically involved in the action, the characters seem to offer information that equips the viewer to re-enact their actions and achieve the same results. In a sense, the programme teaches the viewer how to survive in the Alaskan wilderness and how to engage in a more primitive lifestyle than what urbanity allows for.

Alaska: The Last Frontier can be considered a semi-informative programme that provides practical learning opportunities within an entertainment framework (Hill, 2005, p. 107). For the urban viewer who has little need to make soap or use wilderness survival skills, these lessons are likely to be redundant. However, the learning opportunities that the programme offers plays into the nostalgic fantasies of reconnecting with the wilderness and adopting a more primitive lifestyle for the purpose of accessing the freedom, success and fulfilment of the frontiersmen. These lessons give the impression of equipping the viewer for future encounters with the wilderness.

Alaska: The Last Frontier blends the elements of two types of reality television programmes that Hill discusses. The first type of programme is focused on consumer issues of health-related topics that are thought to be practically informative for the viewer. This is because the viewer "can relate to them, and store information, or ideas, for later use" (2005, p. 107). For example, a programme may address the practical tips on what you should do if someone is choking, and the viewer absorbs the information on how to stop the afflicted from choking and stores it until needed. The second type are programme is about 'extreme history' "where ordinary people live as if they were in the 1900s, or the First World War" (Hill, 2005, p. 100). These programmes are regarded as informative by their illustration of history from the point of view of someone (Hill, 2005, p. 102). Rather than store information, the viewers observe "the way things have changed" over time. For example, ordinary people trying to live a First World War lifestyle will explain their challenges and identify the modern conveniences that they miss (Hill, 2005,

p. 102). In the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, both types of didactic content are incorporated in the programme. The programme guides the viewer in a step-by-step process about how to achieve tasks and challenges that occur when living primitively. At the same time, the programme provides information that highlights how differently the Kilchers live in comparison to urban lifestyles. In the example discussed below, the viewers are guided through the process of building a fence. Throughout this process the viewer is shown how every step is performed by Eivin or Otto who are not employing anyone to help with the project or purchasing a kit that assembles a fence in '3 easy steps'. The viewers can 'see for themselves', which is a crucial aspect of a programme being informative (Hill, 2005, p. 89). The Kilchers include the viewer in their processes and explains to the viewer the exact process they will see onscreen. Through the provision of these examples, the viewers are encouraged to believe that they are able to achieve exactly what the Kilchers do. The viewer personalizes the information and imagines themselves in the place of Otto or Eivin, though they are unlikely to find themselves in this situation. Through this personalization of information, the viewer indicates that they relate to the programme and the lifestyle depicted onscreen (Hill, 2005, p. 89). Which, in turn, indicates their inclination toward a primitive lifestyle. This learning through watching reality television stirs a confidence that assures one of their ability to succeed in a rural lifestyle, and ultimately, their ability to access the success, freedom, and fulfilment that the frontier myth describes of the frontiersmen. These learning opportunities give the impression that a rural past is not necessarily completely lost but can be reclaimed through the learning of near-forgotten skills.

In Season 4, Episode 6 (*Greener Pastures*), Otto explains that it is essential for him to have another large pasture for his cattle and horses. His cattle herd has grown, and therefore, he needs another contained place to keep the cattle. For the new pasture to come to fruition, he must build a fence around a stretch of land. At the beginning of this narrative, Otto establishes for the viewer precisely how important the family's cattle is: "I grow these cattle for things we need; whether it be for milk, whether it be for beef, whether it be for beef to trade the neighbours. Every cow we have is a resource for our survival". Otto then establishes the significance of the project by stating that "containment of your animals is paramount to good herd management, and I've got a growing herd. I need more pastures; I need a good fence; I need a damn good fence". Immediately afterward, Eivin reinforces the importance of the

project by summarising the immensity of the undertaking: “It’s gonna be a big project. We’re closing in close to 40 acres of land and that is enough greenery and enough grass to feed a lot of cows and a lot of horses”. All of these statements herald the importance of the didactic address that will follow and implies that for a prospective homesteader (or those fraternizing with the fantasy of living a more primitive lifestyle), the information should be stored for later use.

From a bird’s eye view the camera shows the site on which the pasture will be established, and at the same time, Otto’s voice-over explains the enormity of the pasture and how critical it is to complete this task. As Otto begins to speak, the birds-eye-view shot turns to sepia and through superimposed markings, the perimeter of the pasture is outlined, showing the position of the pasture in relation to the homestead cabins and where two gates will be built. This combination of voice-over and digital illustration is didactic in essence and shows the need for this project to be well thought-through and designed. This shot also provides a map of where the characters will be working on the homestead and an image of the overall goal. In doing this, the programme orientates the viewer and prepares the way forward as the scene progresses to a more close-up view of the process. Arguably, this level of detailed information is superfluous: The narrative would make sense without the viewer being informed of these details. However, to provide this information foregrounds the intentional didactic address and gives the impression that this information will lead to the viewer being equipped to develop a successful homestead.

Eivin and Otto discuss how they will establish the boundary lines and finally agree on cutting down spruce tree trunks and tying white bags to the ends of them, resembling flag poles. This step could have been explained briefly through a voice-over; however, the lengthy discussion takes place onscreen and provides another lesson on how to construct using primitive practices and material and the importance of choosing the correct method.

While the camera soars over forestry, a voice-over from Otto provides a historical angle on their task, drawing attention to his father Yule and subsequently to the American history of the frontiersmen. Otto says:

This is a legacy fence. My Dad came here and made his mark and cut his homestead out of the wilderness and Eivin and I are here, right now, cutting our share of the wilderness into our homestead.

With this monologue, the present primitive lifestyle of the Kilchers is reconnected with their ancestral primitive lifestyle. Value is placed on living like Otto's father did, thus implying a value in pursuing the lifestyle of one's ancestors, like the American frontiersmen. Otto directs the scene's focus to America's past and draws parallels between his lifestyle and that of the frontiersmen. Thus, the programme not only presents the viewer with images reminiscent of America's idealised past, but it also presents a text that shows and teaches the viewer how to live similarly to the frontiersmen.

After this interlude, the narrative returns to the construction of the fence as Eivin demonstrates how they use the spruce tree trunks to determine the boundary lines for the pasture. He explains that erecting the fence will be difficult because it will be on a steep hill, they will need to go through a swamp, and they have many trees in their way. Nevertheless, Otto and Eivin proceed with establishing the boundary lines and explain that they will move their machinery toward each flagpole to ensure the perimeter lines of the pasture are straight. Once again, the viewer is guided through the characters' process: The way forward and the problems being overcome is explained.

After cutting away to two other narratives in the episode, the fence construction continues with the same high level of detail provided. Eventually, Otto's bulldozer becomes stuck in the dirt and Eivin brings down his excavator to help Otto out. In the process, Eivin's excavator breaks and the fence project comes to a halt. As Eivin attends to the breakdown, the scene cuts between shots of Otto standing over Eivin as he works, Eivin showing Otto the broken part and Otto helping Eivin as he replaces the broken part. This gives the impression of Otto being the overseer: He is letting the younger generation learn by grappling with the task yet guiding where needed. We see the interaction of Otto giving Eivin his guidance and knowledge, and Eivin putting this information into action.

These visual representations of generations intermingling and continuing primitive practices are reinforced through the interviews that are cut to throughout the scene. Eivin explains how

his dad is a “recycler at heart” and seldom reduces his accumulated parts. In response to this, Otto explains in his interview:

Getting a new grease fitting could be a two-day event around here. So obviously it was important to save those. Sometimes I think he throws too many things away. He’s discovering that he’s got a whole damn family to raise yet and he’s got things to save for his children.

Thus, not only do we see the father and son duo working together and living out the continuation of the homesteading lifestyle, but we also hear the reasoning behind the hoarding of old parts and that this method of living does not only benefit the current generation but also assist future generations. Of course, this dialogue between Eivin and Otto is constructed and intentionally forms a didactic message that echoes contemporary environmental discourses about the value of preserving old items (or old ways). This idea of a constructed message is reinforced through the initial absence of a soundtrack and then a quiet, unobtrusive guitar melody. The voices of the characters are therefore foregrounded, which makes their speech the primary focus. Implied through this editing choice is the importance of hearing what the characters have to say. Interestingly, the soundtrack becomes more audible and upbeat once Eivin has repaired the excavator, which is after the didactic information has been delivered and the narrative is about to proceed to the completion of the fence. The scene is concluded by yet another didactic moment as Eivin offers insight into the tools that he uses as the viewers watch him wrap up the repairing of his excavator. Eivin says:

My tools are some of the most important things I have, you know, short of my family. Some of those tools that are essential for homesteading. You take really good care of and they’ll last generations; it’s part of homesteading. I definitely think that my Dad has passed that on to me, and Yule passed that on to him.

Eivin offers the viewers advice on living primitively: One must have the essential tools for living primitively and look after them. Paired with this advice is the ever-present idea of patriarchal lineage and placing value on the fact that Yule passed down important information for homesteading to Otto, and Otto has passed this information on to Eivin. Had Otto or Eivin chosen to live a different lifestyle, this important information would have been redundant and lost with the passing of Yule. In the same vein, the ideals of the frontier myth can become

redundant and vanish if no one receives them. This can be perceived as losing “the nation’s most sacred myth of origin” (Cronon, 1996, p. 77) and the understanding or experience of what it is to be truly American. Eivin thus offers his homesteading advice about tools to the viewer, involving the viewer in the practice of passing down information. The idea of reusing information or objects is contrary to the values of contemporary late capitalist society where continuous consumption is emphasised. In this scene, there is a strong message that advocates for information and tools to be passed from generation to generation and thereby substantiating their value and practicality in a contemporary age. This information links contemporary life with the idea of primitive living, indicating that the idealised origins of the American character have not yet vanished. Likewise, while the breakdown of the machinery makes no valuable contribution to the progression of the narrative, by including it in the episode, the viewers are made aware of the trials that the homesteaders face and are shown how to overcome them. The programme guides the viewer through the entire process that Otto and Eivin go through, offering the ‘whole picture’ rather than just the highlights. Piece-by-piece the viewer is able to observe the building of the fence, and in a sense, is being educated on how to go about building one’s own fence if needs be. Like Eivin’s advice on homesteading tools, the viewer is offered specific advice on how to live as the frontiersmen may have. This information offers material that is potentially useful in reinstating a connection to the idealised images of America’s past.

Finally, Otto and Eivin reach the ultimate stage of building the fence: Barbed wire needs to be stretched around the perimeter of the pasture. Instead of using the traditional method of stretching the wire and rolling it out, Eivin proposes a new way of achieving this step, by using his excavator to roll out the wire. After a few glitches, he works out a way to use the excavator to unroll the barbed wire. This emphasises the interaction between past and present. On one hand, the father and son have valued their inherited knowledge and put it to use. On the other hand, Eivin ‘pioneers’ a new way of carrying out a task; he comes up with something new. Once again, the details of how they build the fence are shared. The cattle are then moved into the new pasture, heralding the end, and success, of Otto and Eivin’s task.

The episode concludes with both Eivin and Otto offering their reflective thoughts on the new pasture:

Eivin: "Right now it looks pretty much just like wild overgrown land here in Alaska, but three to five years down the road it'll start to really look like hopefully a beautiful hay meadow. My grandfather built hay meadows that I'm still using today, and so, I'm on the forefront now of building hay meadows that hopefully my son, Findlay, will be able to use and maybe even my grandkids will be able to use".

Otto: "This fence will be here after I'm gone, honey".

Charlotte: "Yeah".

Otto: "This is pioneering. This is a continuum of building a homestead, and that's the most fun part: Living a dream and passing it on to the next generation".

Here, Eivin reiterates the message of generational continuity that has been woven throughout the episode: How they owe their current successes to Yule's passed down knowledge. What Eivin says also reiterates the frontier myth in that it reinforces the message that the frontiersmen did good and steadfast work that has prospered America for many generations. He identifies how he is doing the same work as his grandfather and because of this, he may also benefit future generations. In using the term 'forefront', Eivin alludes to the idea of the frontier and being on the cusp of something good, something that will prosper the future. While the pioneer moment is in the past, the idea of pioneering is about doing something new. Although the characters gaze backward and celebrate their history, they have also created something new in this episode, just like their pioneering ancestors. They embody what it means to be pioneers, rather than statically admiring the past. Otto strengthens this sense through his statement that offers his definition of pioneering. For Otto, pioneering means living a dream, or in other words, getting to experience one's own fantasy in real life. What is more, Otto identifies how the next generation can experience the same dream, or the same fantasy, if they continue living in a pioneering manner. Once again, value is placed on acknowledging the past and how it interacts with the present, while the frontier myth is reiterated through the idealised images of living primitively. The idea of being on a frontier or living like the frontiersmen did is represented as idyllic, and these images essentially reflect the comfort and fulfilment that serve a nostalgic sensibility.

Thus, the didactic address of this narrative offers lessons that seem attainable. Otto's closing statement to the scene confirms that the task represented onscreen embodies what pioneering and homesteading really is and that it is fun. This underscores the educational aspect of the narrative that has been woven throughout. As a teacher may conclude a demonstration of how to solve an equation by saying "... and this is how you solve the equation", Otto concludes the narrative by stating that what the viewer has observed is exactly what pioneering and homesteading is all about. Eivin and Otto have demonstrated an entire process integral to living a self-sufficient lifestyle, and so, for the viewer this information can be stored for later use in their pursuit of experiencing the same fulfilment that the characters have expressed.

This model is used in all the narratives that are about achieving a goal that affects the sustainability of the Kilcher lifestyle. Each episode will have at least one of these narratives. The programme represents the Kilchers encountering tasks and challenges in various spheres: Domestic, agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting. Therefore, each episode incorporates both types of didactic content that Hill details: Guiding the viewer in how to achieve a task and providing information that highlights how differently the Kilcher family live in comparison to urban practices. By addressing the various spheres, the programme provides a guide on how to survive in the Alaskan wilderness that instils confidence in those imagining this primitive lifestyle and assures them of their ability to succeed and access the success, freedom and fulfilment that is associated with the frontier myth and the idea of reclaiming the past. Ultimately, this reactionary view uses nostalgia for a 'lost rural lifestyle' to promote the idea of learning a way of life that is part of an immensely conservative and selective narrative.

Therefore *Alaska: The Last Frontier* restages America's frontier mythology by recalling powerful ideologies, values and actions that are associated with an extremely idealised vision of what America perceives as its origin story. In this chapter I have shown how ideas of primitivism, sublimity, savagery and civilization have influenced perceptions of the wilderness and rural living. This has resulted in primitive practices and values being portrayed as far more fulfilling than contemporary experiences of urban environments. I have also examined the construction and preservation of America's frontier mythology and considered how American identity has been derived from an extremely exclusionary narrative that ignores the narrative

of American Indians and thus heroes white American identity and its ostensible claim to America. I have illustrated how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this narrative and portrays frontier living to elicit exceptional qualities of self-reliance, ambition and strength, which deliver unprecedented freedom therefore correlating with contemporary late capitalist discourse.

Central to this chapter has been my consideration of how the televisual medium of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* emphasises the reactionary message of the text. I have argued that television is a way in which nature and urbanity are combined, which in the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, is a response to the sociological norms of late capitalist urban life. I have paid specific attention to the reality television mode and identified how certain characteristics of this genre facilitate the evocation of nostalgia for a closer connection to the values and practices associated with primitive living. In doing this, I have recognised how the show incorporates a strong didactic address that provides instructional information on how one may go about living in the wilderness. I have shown that this instructional content not only gives the impression of equipping the audience with practical advice on how to live primitively, but also implies that these practices will mean accessing the ostensible success, strength, fulfilment and freedom that the characters demonstrate throughout each episode. Furthermore, I have explored how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* uses spectacular imagery and contemplative shots that exhibit the Alaskan wilderness as sublime, thus supporting perceptions of the American wilderness and its associations with exceptionalism and living the American Dream.

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND ANOMIE: AN EXPLORATION OF *ALASKA: THE LAST FRONTIER'S* NOSTALGIC EVOCATIONS OF IDEALISED FAMILY AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

In her extensive work on the history and contemporary dynamics of the American family, Arlene Skolnick notes:

The rhetoric of family crisis has persisted as a theme in our culture for more than a century. So has the more general belief that modern society itself is in a state of crisis, and that we are becoming a nation of rootless and alienated individuals. Whenever significant social change takes place, the old themes resurface to express the anxieties that change evokes. (1991, p. xix)

Skolnick identifies a persisting compulsion to declare society and the family at peril when the tides of change threaten comfortable rhythms of life. In his sociological work on cities in America, Hans Pols recognises urbanisation, immigration and industrialisation as the forces that initiated perpetual change in modern society (2003, p. 195). In the nineteenth century, workers from the countryside or abroad needed to relocate to urban areas to find work in cities where capitalist enterprises were situated (Pols, 2003, p. 195). The rhythms of life for many were disrupted and because of the rapid pace of development since industrialisation, change has been perpetual. As a result, families and communities are endlessly trying to adapt to the ever-evolving rhythms of life. In these circumstances nostalgia for the family emerges as a coping mechanism; a yearning to recapture a time and space where the individual felt more stable.

Alaska: The Last Frontier is a reality television programme centred on the Kilcher family and their community. What is most significant about the programme is that it does not reflect the anxieties and tumultuous change that is extensively written about in contemporary society or reflected in contemporary family television shows. Rather, it offers an idealised vision of traditional family life. I argue that this provides a palliative for contemporary anxieties about social change. The list of television shows that exemplify the centrality of family on television is extensive and includes popular programmes such as *Modern Family* (2009–), *Friends* (1994–2004), and *Last Man Standing* (2011–2017) or reality shows such as *Sister Wives* and *Duck*

Dynasty. In these more recent shows the turmoil of contemporary urban life is represented through depicting the various ways in which the family unit is affected and attempts to maintain its existence. *Alaska: The Frontier* carries on television's traditional interest in representing the family; however, it is more aligned with much earlier forms of family television shows such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) or *Little House on The Prairie* (1974–1982). It celebrates domestic harmony rather than chaos and offers idealised images of the traditional American family. All of the episodes in Season 4 present the Kilcher family as reminiscent of a traditional American family in the pre-industrial era. Alongside these images of a close-knit family are the images of an effective community. The community portrayed in the programme fits the description of an agrarian village from pre-industrial America: "small and socially homogenous", "close-knit social life", "social cohesion and neighbourliness as well as fortitude of character and personal well-being" (Pols, 2003, p. 194). The sense of rootlessness and alienation that Skolnick attributes to modern society is not represented in the programme. Thus, *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representations of family and community veer away from how certain contemporary television shows represent the present-day American family, offering alternative images of a stable family structure and a tight-knit community.

In this chapter I will discuss how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* generates nostalgia for an apparently lost sense of kinship and community, reminiscent of a pre-industrial-revolution American culture. I will rely on the work of Arlene Skolnick (1991, 1996), Stephanie Coontz (1995), Lynn Spigel (1992) and Phillip Webb (2011) to examine what the term 'family' means in American culture and work toward an understanding of how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* evokes nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship. The programme also kindles nostalgia for a sense of community that is perceived as lost and I rely upon the work of John Demos (1974), David McMillan and David Chavis (1986), and Phillip Webb (2011) to explore the meaning of 'community' and the ways in which communities have been affected by the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation. I will also argue that even though present-day American nostalgia is generally attributed to a yearning to recapture the 'Golden Age' of the 1950s nuclear family, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* looks past the 1950s and generates nostalgia for a more eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century idea of the family and community. In this discussion I will primarily use McMillan and Chavis's four criteria for a definition and theory of community (1986, p. 9) to illustrate how the

programme highlights the integral part of the community in the Kilcher family's life—unlike the inward gazing nuclear family of the 1950s—and to substantiate this argument, I will also draw from Hans Pols's description of pre-industrial communities (2003, p. 194). At this juncture it is important to note that it is a Western family and community structure that is valued in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, which excludes the structures of certain indigenous communities and non-heteronormative family structures.

To further understand the relationship between the urban setting in which the programme is largely consumed and the nostalgia for a sense of family and community that the programme stirs, I explore the condition of anomie that Elwin Powell (1962), Hans Pols (2003), Robert Merton (1938), and Marco Orru (1983) have written about. Exploring this condition provides insight into how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* appeals to urban viewers and generates nostalgia for a seemingly lost sense of kinship and community that is drawn from an idealised pre-industrial era. Through representing ideals vastly different from the ideals of contemporary urban society, the programme potentially offers a source of consolation and hope for people whose own lives are affected by anomie and who have experienced the breakdown of social bonds. This examination also helps to illustrate how the nostalgic evocation of an anomie-free life represented on *Alaska: The Last Frontier* can be read as a response to the pervasive anomic experiences of late capitalist urban life. This hankering after the past or a utopian vision of family and community is also a form of conservatism. In associating idyllic visions of family and community with a bygone (conservative) era, the show uses nostalgia as a reactionary device, justifying a dissatisfaction with certain social structures that have been forced to change since the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation.

Through this process of generating nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship and community, the televisual form of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reifies the ideal of the traditional American family and agrarian community. This reification offers the audience an opportunity to engage with 'real-life' examples of the ideals nostalgia seeks to reconnect with. The televisual medium of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* enables this reification by offering images of a 'real' family who exists simultaneously to the audience. Therefore, the sense of kinship and community represented in the programme seems attainable.

There are distinct differences between the ideas of the family and community before the industrial revolution emerged, and ideas of the family and community after the industrial revolution ensued. Although I am aware that the evolution of familial and community structures cannot be definitively identified, I will be using broad strokes in my argument as I refer to the pre-industrial era as the locus of the traditional American nuclear family and the post-industrial era as an ongoing era of perpetual change in familial and community ideals and structures. I use the term 'kinship' in my argument not only to refer to the literal blood relation of kin, but as a term that encompasses the sense of unity and 'oneness' experienced by the traditional family of the pre-industrial era.

The Evolution of what 'Family' and 'Community' Means in Western Culture

In Western culture the term 'family' generally refers to the nuclear family, a "parent child unit living together" (Skolnick, 1996, pp. 36–37). Traditionally, the nuclear character "relates to the process of marriage-making", where the families of a heterosexual couple would "provide the necessary means, contributing land, housing, money and personal effects in amounts stipulated by formal 'deeds of gift'" (Demos, 1974, p. 425). The couple would form their own household and become a separate unit, their own nuclear family. Lynn Spigel's (1992) work examines the history of the American family by exploring its transformations and identifying points at which the rhythms of the American family were significantly altered. She identifies that in the eighteenth century the American middle-class family generally farmed as a way of generating an income. This agrarian way of life meant that the family needed to band together in order to farm effectively (Spigel, 1992, p. 12). As for the home, "each house stood as an entity unto itself, usually set in a pastoral landscape that suggested repose and moral sanctity" (Spigel, 1992, p. 13). From an ideological perspective, John Demos explains that "the individual household was the basic unit of everyday living, the irreducible cell from which all human society was fashioned" (Demos, 1974, p. 423). From these descriptions, we can see that the family was not only perceived as a literal group of kin living in the same house, but also a stronghold and locus for moulding the moral character of the individual and subsequently the society of which the individual will be a part of. The home was perceived as a locus of purity, refuge and tranquillity, a place of safety.

Like the American family, communities have been an integral part of American society throughout its history. Pols describes the eighteenth-century communities as “small and socially homogenous agrarian villages with their close-knit social life ... [They] have been praised as fostering social cohesion and neighbourliness as well as fortitude of character and personal well-being” (2003, p. 194). The image of family and community from the eighteenth century is that of close-knit nuclear families leading agrarian lifestyles in order to survive. A family’s livelihood was generated in the home or on the farm, and generally no one needed to leave their homesteads or communities to survive. These families placed great value in having good relations with their neighbours and by being part of a close-knit community; it was believed that all benefitted.

In the mid-nineteenth century the industrial revolution began in America, which meant that “production shifted to the world outside the home, to an urban landscape of factories and office jobs” (Spigel, 1992, p. 12). With industrialisation and urbanisation, came a separation between the home and the working place. Whereas in the pre-industrial era the home and workplace were one and the same, the industrial revolution meant that the middle-class man needed to leave his home and travel to work daily (Spigel, 1992, p. 13). Workers living further afield needed to leave the countryside or their country and “relocate to urban areas to find work in cities where capitalist enterprises were situated” (Pols, 2003, p. 195). Not only were families separated and forced to adjust to this new way of life, but community relationships were also affected. Skolnick explains how in pre-industrial society, “family life was enmeshed with community. Neighbours and servants as well as community authorities were expected to oversee and intervene in the intimate affairs of the individuals and family” (1991, p. 26). However, through the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation, this dynamic was forced to break down.

In his work on family values, social capital and contradictions of American modernity, Philip Webb discusses the modernisation of the family and explains what happened because of industrial urbanisation:

Long-standing ties of people to local communities eroded ... Social relations which were (literally) ground in place began to fray, and new, more distant (and often instrumental)

relations began to replace the much older ties that bound generations to their long-standing homes and communities. (2011, p. 99)

The foundations of pre-industrial society were therefore broken down through the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation. In the wake of this transformation, social structures needed to be reformed and fitted to new rhythms of life. Through this reformation, social roles were divided as the middle-class women remained at home looking after the children and domestic responsibilities. Men took up the breadwinning role and women the domestic role (Spigel, 1992, p. 13). For the families who relocated to urban environments in order to be closer to the man's workplace, it became apparent that urban settings were not conducive to raising a 'proper' (or traditional) family (Spigel, 1992, p. 17). The home set in a pastoral landscape had fallen away, as had the ideals of the home being a place of sanctity and purity. Consequently, "the home was organized as the antithesis of the urban centers, which were thought to be threatening and sinful" (Spigel, 1992, p. 12). With this divide between the workplace and home, suburban areas were thus developed (joined to urban centres by railroad) and became regarded as an acceptable place to raise a family (Spigel, 1992, p. 17).

Considering the many transformations that the industrial revolution brought about, Spigel (1992) recognises how the thoughts surrounding the nuclear family also transformed. She explains that in the pre-industrial era the family was tied together by economic survival because they needed to work on the farm together in order to produce enough to eat and sell. In contrast, the onset of the industrial revolution meant that most middle-class men worked for a salary, which meant that the family was no longer "tied by economic survival" (Spigel, 1992, p. 12). Spigel identifies that because of the change in the financial dynamic of the family, "the family took on a more overtly ideological function in relation to the marketplace outside the home" (1992, p. 12). The middle-class family was perceived as a site for restoration and comfort, and the areas of work were considered places of hardship, dividing the public and private spheres (Spigel, 1992, p. 12). The suburban home and family were still regarded as places of sanctity, reminiscent of images from a pre-industrial era. These ideologies were perpetuated by the radio, introduced into American homes in the early twentieth century:

The new technology was often depicted in ways that recalled the traditional values of a simpler age. The new machines of leisure were incorporated into the imagery of a

perfect past, which was less a concrete historical period than a confused pastiche of ideal moments. At times, the discourse evoked a pre-industrial America of pastoral beauty and natural harmony; at other times it recalled the early Victorian age when family values were rooted firmly in Christian doctrine. (Spigel, 1992, p. 23)

Characteristics of nostalgia are evident in Spigel's description of the radio content in the early twentieth century. The past is deemed simpler than the present and is represented as perfect or ideal. Discontent with the changes that industrialisation and urbanisation brought, the past was referred to by offering a patchwork of ideal moments for the nostalgic person to yearn for. Identifying the characteristics of nostalgia in Spigel's discussion is important to my argument because it indicates how nostalgia for a pre-industrial nuclear family and community stems from the transformations that the industrial revolution brought about. Thus, just as nostalgia for the wilderness is a long-standing thread running through American history, nostalgia for the ideals of the agrarian, heteronormative nuclear family and sense of community is persistent and has manifested in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*.

Family and Community: How *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is Reminiscent of America's Pre-industrial Era

Alaska: The Last Frontier represents a romanticised vision of family and community that is comparable with the pre-industrial American era. This era certainly established an idea of family that coheres with American identity and what it means to be a part of the American character. Social historians Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg note that the pre-industrial American family was "a private place, a shelter for higher redeeming values and a shelter from the aggressive and selfish world of commerce" (1989, p. 4) and that since the industrial revolution, this ideal of the family has shifted gradually, reaching a point where "many Americans are groping for a new paradigm of American family life, but in the meantime a profound sense of confusion and ambivalence reigns" (1989, p. 6).

Although the pre-industrial era established an idea of family that seems more cohesive and emotionally fulfilling than contemporary family dynamics, it is crucial to note that the Golden Age of the American nuclear family is not regarded to be the pre-industrial era. The time and space to which the American popular culture most frequently returns is the idealistic image of the nuclear family in the 1950s (Skolnick, 1991, p. 50). The 1950s is generally characterized by

unprecedented prosperity and the era of togetherness for the American nuclear family (Skolnick, 1991, p. 54; Skolnick, 1996, p. 2, p. 54). At this time, the turbulence of the Second World War had subsided, enabling rejuvenation and prosperity for America. In *The American Family and the Nostalgia Trap*, Stephanie Coontz explains that “amid the extraordinary consumerism unleashed by the post-war economic boom, the prospects seemed bright for finding new comforts, both material and emotional, in the home” (1995, p. 7). Interestingly, this was the historical moment in which television became an integral feature of the American home and is widely theorised as the ‘new hearth’ of the 1950s home. There was a drive to recapture a more traditional image of the nuclear family in the 1950s, however, only a portion of this image was applied. It was the “Victorian cult of domesticity with its polarized sex roles and almost religious reverence for the home and hearth” (Skolnick, 1991, p. 52) that was recaptured, not the traditional sense of community. Living within a community was an integral part of the traditional nuclear family life, however, in the 1950s young couples were encouraged to:

... move away from parents and kin and cut ties with old networks of friends and neighbours who might compete for emotional attention. The new ideal was to wean couples away from traditional extra-familial networks, encouraging them to focus all their energies and find all their gratifications within the home. (Coontz, 1995, p. 7)

Evidently, the traditional role of the community in the nuclear family was discouraged, and the focus was set inwards to the home and the close-knit family. The nuclear family was understood as the “fount of virtue, spring of wealth, main source of child socialization, and centre of all personal happiness” (Coontz, 1995, p. 7). The media perpetuated this idealistic image by characterizing the dynamic as togetherness and child centeredness (Skolnick, 1996, p. 134), and thereby representing the inward gaze as a positive adaption in social bonds. The aspect of community, so integral to the traditional pre-industrial-revolution families, was no longer considered important, and arguably, remains a key characteristic of contemporary American society.

Undoubtedly, the idyllic images of the 1950s are ideological and present Americans with a time and space to refer to as the ‘Golden Age’ of the nuclear family without having to address the repercussions of industrialisation. This idealisation ignores pertinent factors that would

characterize the 1950s as a time of cultural and social restraint, discrimination and an overall sense of discontent (Skolnick, 1991, pp. 72–73) that gave rise to the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s. Considering the social turbulence that ensued after the 1950s, we can understand how the 1950s became a marker for the idealised memory of family, prosperity, and national unity rather than the locus from which the upheaval of the 1960s came.

Although *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of the family may share similar qualities to the 1950s nuclear family, the programme generates nostalgia for a more eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century idea of family and community. Where the nuclear family of the 1950s set its gaze inward and disengaged from traditional ideas of community, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents both a familial community and a neighbourly community. The communities represented in the programme reflect Lynn Spigel's (1992) and Hans Pols's descriptions of pre-industrial communities, demonstrating a dynamic where the focus is not inward toward the nuclear but outward to an extra-familial community. An older image of family is also represented and reflects Spigel's and Demos's (1974) descriptions of how pre-industrial families banded together for survival rather than separating, as was encouraged in the 1950s. Each family group on the programme lives independently in separate houses, reflecting Spigel's and Demos's description of the eighteenth-century home (1992, p. 13; 1974, p. 423). However, in order to survive, they realize the importance of banding together to live self-sufficiently (Spigel, 1992, p. 12). There is a mutual dependence between the nuclear family groups and each family's needs are noted and attended to. For example: Otto, Charlotte and their youngest son August live together in a house; Otto's son Eivin lives in a separate home with his wife Eve and son Findlay; and Otto's nephew Atz-Lee lives in his home with his wife Jane and their two children. Despite the separated homes, Charlotte will go to Eve's home and help with canning smoked salmon (*Secrets of the Range Rider*, Season 4, Episode 9) and Jane will offer to join Charlotte and Otto's annual cattle drive (*On the Move*, Season 4, Episode 4). In every episode members of separate nuclear families are involved in the goings on of their kin and each of these interactions are focused on the survival of the group. Thus, the interactions between characters onscreen are reminiscent of an era before the effects of industrialisation

and urbanisation. Essentially, the characters are part of a family community in which a number of nuclear family units band together to create a larger group of kin.

Furthermore, the Kilcher family members are part of a larger community made up of their neighbours and fellow homesteaders. Although most television shows foreground community, this community is not drawn together through living on the same block, sharing career fields or being part of the same tribe; they are brought together through their need for survival, which is what pre-industrial communities were originally based on. These people help the Kilchers when they are in need, and in turn, they will receive help from the Kilchers. In *Thanksgiving on the Homestead* (Season 4, Episode 8), the sense of community (familial and extra-familial) that is prevalent in every episode of the programme is demonstrated even more clearly and provides a pertinent reflection of Hans Pols's descriptions of pre-industrial communities. Additionally, McMillan and Chavis' criteria for a sense of community are also at play in this example. They propose that four elements define a sense of community: (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integration and fulfilment, and (4) shared emotional connection (1986, p. 9). According to McMillan and Chavis, membership refers to the "feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness" (1989, p. 9), and influence refers to a "sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members" (1989, p. 9). Integration and fulfilment of needs means that the needs of each member "will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group" (1989, p. 9), while shared emotional connection refers to "the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences" (1989 p. 9). I will show how a sense of community is portrayed in the episode by identifying how the programme represents these four elements. Indeed, the same could be said for the cast of any standard American television drama such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–) or *Cheers* (1982–1993); however, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents community as something that is more rewarding when practising pre-industrial ways of living. The text thus offers examples of how the dynamics of pre-industrial communities are beneficial to the individual and the community, proffering a conservative narrative that conveys a dissatisfaction with how certain social structures have been forced to change since the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation.

Before I proceed, it is important to note that the image of the Thanksgiving celebration that is featured in this particular episode reflects a specific American ideal. Thanksgiving is a specifically American holiday that serves to recall a successful harvest reaped during the time of the frontiersmen. This harvest represented the success of the frontiersmen in overcoming the challenges of the wilderness and therefore being able to survive in the New World. Thus, the origins of Thanksgiving essentially lie in the celebration of the frontiersmen and are associated with the narrative of the frontier myth, which I establish that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* subscribes to in Chapter 1. Through reflecting the celebration of Thanksgiving, the programme not only re-establishes its support of the frontier myth's message, but also calls to attention an era long before industrialisation or urbanisation and reinforces the notion that families and communities of this era were as successful as the frontiersmen. It is therefore implied that the successful familial and communal relations represented in the programme are because of their similarity to an era preceding industrialisation and urbanisation.

The Kilchers celebrate Thanksgiving in Otto and Charlotte's home. All of the characters from the programme are crammed around a long table and among them are guests. The guests were invited as a gesture of gratitude for the help that they have given members of the family over the summer months. As certain family members narrate why they invited guests, a series of close-up and medium-close-up shots show the people around the table smiling and chatting among each other. Charlotte has her hand around an elderly man's shoulder, Eve's mother bounces baby Findlay on her lap, and Otto pours wine for everyone. The close-up shots emphasise not only the close proximity in which this group sits around the table but also the closeness of their community and the degree to which they share their lives. Intermingling with the diegetic sound of conversation and laughter, a violin provides a folksy-style soundtrack with a similar melody to that of the show's theme tune. Its informal feel and upbeat tempo convey a sense of relaxation and merriment and helps to foreground that this scene is one of few where we see the Kilcher family relaxing rather than working on their homestead.

A medium-long-shot looking down the table introduces Otto's toast to the guest he invited. The group clink their glasses together and expresses thanks to all who have been invited, and Otto proceeds with his words of gratitude for his friend Bob. During this shot the soundtrack stops and Otto's speech becomes the focus, emphasising the significance of expressing

gratitude. The scene cuts between more close-ups and medium-close-ups of people nodding in agreement or smiling at Bob, which further underlines the value of their community and the help they offer each other. After Otto's speech, the narrative proceeds to excerpts showing how the guests have helped the characters; the first of which shows Bob helping to fix a particularly old generator.

In this scene there is a real celebration of the continued value of old things. Although the generator has been stowed away for over 20 years and essentially belongs to a previous generation, Otto recognises the value of 'resuscitating' the machine. In the same vein, Otto invites Bob (aged 89) to 'resuscitate' his knowledge of old machinery and thereby make relevant what is generally regarded as redundant or outdated information. Once the generator begins to work again, the sheer jubilation from Otto reinforces this idea of celebrating the worth of what is generally regarded as antiquated. This idea of the past being of value in the present is visually represented in the scene too. In most of the shots Bob stands in close proximity to the generator, often with his hands resting on the machine. This visually represents his relationship to the generator or the era from which it originates. In most shots Otto shares the frame with Bob, however, he stands away from the machine and only touches it after receiving Bob's advice on how to fix it. As the two characters discuss the repairs, Otto draws closer to the machine. The scene shows the gradual blending of past and present as Bob imparts his knowledge and Otto is able to engage with the historical entity and to help establish its continued value. Not only does this scene provide an example of how the show celebrates the past, but it also offers a critique of late capitalist wastefulness and consumer habits, highlighting the unwarranted disregard for the past.

Furthermore, the help Bob provides is an example of extra-familial community and also represents McMillan and Chavis' four elements of community. Bob's response to Otto's request for help shows that Otto matters to Bob, thus demonstrating membership and influence. By helping, Bob enables Otto to succeed in living a self-sufficient lifestyle during the winter months, which therefore demonstrates fulfilment of needs. A sense of community is further expressed through Otto's reflection on Bob's help when he says, "I rely on my neighbours and my friends. Bob is the type of person who instils in me the want to do something in return and that's the nicest feeling of all. That's the real feeling of community

that we try to operate on here". Thus, Bob inspires Otto to want to help Bob in return, which demonstrates integration and fulfilment of needs. The element of shared emotional connection is demonstrated throughout the excerpt as both Otto and Bob work on the generator and share in the celebration when it starts working again. As the two men stand next to the working generator, Bob says, "There's nothing I like better than to see these old pieces of equipment running again". To which Otto replies, "Well there's nothing I like better than you being part of it". This excerpt presents a clear example of how the Kilcher family engage in extra-familial relationships and how these relationships represent a strong sense of community.

The Kilcher family members also share in a familial community. Toward the end of the episode the group reflects on where the food on the table came from and someone asks Eve how her vegetable garden turned out over the course of the summer. The programme cuts to four of the Kilcher family members arriving at Eve's garden to help harvest the vegetables. Rather than Eivin and Eve harvesting the crops alone, they had asked for help. Eivin explains that without the help of four other people the harvesting would have taken two days instead of a few hours. Eivin and Eve ask for help from the family of which they are members (membership). Atz, Bonnie, Charlotte and Otto respond to the request for help because Eivin and Eve are in need and they matter to their community (influence). To harvest the vegetables is essential to their common goal of living self-sufficiently and all of the family members on the programme are committed to this goal (integration and fulfilment, and shared emotional connection). On one hand, this delineation of the familial community seems to be a matter of reflecting the reality of the Kilcher lifestyle. However, on the other hand, the intricacy with which it is explained and demonstrated is also characteristic of certain traditional television forms.

In her work on soap operas, Christine Geraghty observes how the genre tends to offer "extended, complex and interweaving stories" which means they provide the following:

A wide range of characters, allowing for different kinds of identification; the delineation of an identifiable community, paying attention to domestic and familial relationships; and an emphasis, often expressed melodramatically, on the working through of good and evil forces within a family or community. (2005, p. 10)

Although *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is not a soap opera, Geraghty's observations are applicable in so far as helping to show how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* purposefully delineates the workings of the familial community. It exhibits familial relationships and shows how they overcome the challenges of the American wilderness as a means of constructing a complex narrative that works on televisual narrative grounds, rather than simply 'depicting reality'.

The programme also reflects Pols's descriptions of a traditional pre-industrial community (2003, p. 194) and offers images of a close-knit social life and neighbourliness. The group is socially homogenous (as far as the audience can see) as everyone at the table seems to live in rural Alaska with a similar lifestyle to the Kilcher family. Fortitude of character is also demonstrated in the episode as multiple examples of offering help without compensation are shown. Both Atz and Otto indicate that the help that the guests and family members have given will be repaid and that this will be out of a desire to help, not for immediate compensation. Thus, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects the characteristics of a pre-industrial era due to the integral role that community plays in the nuclear family. These examples illustrate how important a sense of community is to the Kilcher family and that their focus is not inward to the nuclear family, but outward to the communities they are a part of, even if these communities are made up of a very particular group of people who are not necessarily representative of the true diversity of American society.

Present-Day Context: Anomie and Nostalgia

Exploring the ideals of family and community of the pre-industrial era has furnished us with images and an understanding of the time and space that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* triggers a yearning for. However, this idealisation of the past needs to be understood in relation to the context in which the programme is received today.

How do we think about a show which celebrates pre-industrial models of community but is made within conditions of late capitalist urban life? One of the most important ways in which post-industrial experiences of human relationships have been theorised is in the body work on the experience of 'anomie'. Anomie is fundamentally the negation of society and hence the negation of all morality. In this section I will discuss anomie as a condition prevalent in contemporary urban environments, and how the experience of anomie contrasts to the images

offered by *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. Through the contrasting characteristics of anomie and the images of family and community represented on the show, nostalgia for an apparently lost sense of kinship and community is generated. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* arguably serves as a source of consolation and hope for people whose own family lives do not reflect the traditional idealistic image of family and community embedded in American culture by offering the nostalgic person a chance to reconnect with ideas of the past.

From the onset of the American industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, the ideals of family and community have evolved due to “sweeping social change, in a society that is neglectful of families and their needs” (Skolnick, 1991, p. 203). Despite the 1950s bearing the label of the ‘Golden Age’ of the American family, it also holds a significant watershed in the breakdown of family and community ties. With the nuclear family encouraged to detach from extra-familial demands and focus its attention and resources inwardly, the traditional idea of family and community being integral to each other deteriorated. As a result, the family and community structures in urban settings acquired characteristics vastly different to the ideals of pre-industrial family and community structures. Webb describes it as follows:

The family has now become an institution or association, which can be sustained through instrumental interventions; it is no longer the organic sentiment relations remaining from some long-faded *Gemeinschaft* [community and society]. The family and the Christian home ideal which were at the center of American critiques of modernization have ceased to be. (2011, p. 115)

The idea of the nuclear family being a “fount of virtue, spring of wealth, main source of child socialization, and center of all personal happiness” (Coontz, 1995, p. 7) seems to have fallen away, along with the traditional image of the community being a “small and socially homogenous”, “close-knit” group, characterized by “social cohesion and neighbourliness as well as fortitude of character and personal well-being” (Pols, 2003, p. 194). According to Webb, this breakdown in familial and community cohesion is owed to “the demands and pace of modern life” that undermine “the potential for such a home for the family” (2011, p. 107). He argues that contemporary families are less emotionally supportive and meaningful than was the norm before industrialisation and urbanisation. He suggests that this has made them more functional rather than meaningful and prone to becoming a “transactional institution” rather

than a “site of affect to be protected by the vagaries of the outside world” (2011, p. 97). Webb reveals a shift in perceptions of family in contemporary society and therefore shows that family structure, in general, has lost the abundant goodness that it was once perceived to have held. Out of these societal developments, theorists have identified that within urban contexts, characteristics of “materialism, selfishness, and an almost pathological disregard for the consequences of self-aggrandizement have become fundamental features of our economy and our polity” (Coontz, 1995, p. 12). Traditional wishes for “marital and family happiness, economic security, home ownership, [and the] education of children” have not disappeared, however, Skolnick explains that the New American Dream is far more complex than before as it combines the traditional wishes with somewhat conflicting contemporary wishes. The individual seeks a greater sense of autonomy but in this pursuit, runs greater risks of loneliness (Skolnick, 1991, p. 220). As a result, along with these characteristics of contemporary urban society comes a sense of social alienation.

The sense of social alienation and isolation experienced in contemporary society has been associated with the condition of anomie, a prominent concept in sociology that has been written about extensively since its conception. It was first written about in the seventeenth century by Jean Marie Guyau, who inspired Emile Durkheim to use the term in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) (Orru, 1983, p. 499). It is therefore a condition that predates the social changes that were brought about in the 1950s and shows a closer relationship with the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation in the mid-nineteenth century. In his exploration of the ethics of anomie, Marco Orru explains the basis of the condition: “Society is the mainspring of moral rules; anomie is the negation of society and hence the negation of all morality. Any loosening of societal rules, whether moral or juridical, can be labelled as anomie” (1983, p. 510). This explanation shows that the basis of the concept of anomie is the traditional idea that the people who intimately surrounds us (family and community) shape our moral principles. Thus, with the drastic change in the interaction of families and communities, traditional morals have been adapted to suit the competitive urban environment of the individual. Therefore, individualism, selfishness, materialism and self-aggrandizement have become essential characteristics for an individual to thrive in an urban context. Hence, the individual’s focus is set inwards, stepping away from a sense of community and the moral

guidelines it may offer. Consequently, society becomes fragmented, lacking in socially homogenous groups—besides those who are homogenous in their focus on autonomy and individualism, which isolates them from each other. This observation indicates that the idea of anomie relies on an idea of pre-industrial community as cohesive and it is this very idea that is presented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*.

Gregory Katsas (2012) draws correlations between the mass media and the rise of anomie in contemporary Western society. He identifies the use of mass media, and television in particular, as a “strong agent of socialization” that can affect the development of self-image and interpersonal behaviours (2012, p. 3). He makes the point that the way in which the media presents its material determines whether or not the content will create or increase feelings of anomie (2012, p. 4). For example, many television shows choose to represent the acquisition of wealth as opportunistic or “through lucky games or situations” (2012, p. 4). The result of this, according to Katsas, is the “decline of the importance of hard work and long term effort in the minds of individuals” (2012, p. 4). Additionally, there is a “relationship between the construction of norms and that of ideas” that can potentially create an anomic situation “leading many people to alienation due to inability to participate in the reality presented by the media” (2012, p. 4). I would imagine this relating to the abundance of shows focused on the lifestyles of the more affluent among society such as *Gossip Girl* (2007–2012), *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012), and *Dynasty* (2018–) and reality television shows such as *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (2006–), *Rich Kids of Beverly Hills* (2014–2016), and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and its numerous spin-offs. Potentially, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* relates to this context with the world it depicts being inaccessible for most. However, the lifestyle of the Kilcher family is presented as something that is alternative, or exceptionally different to the norms of consumerist American society, but also attainable owing to the show’s didactic address that gives the impression of educating the viewer on living this extraordinary rural life.

The process to which anomie refers is not necessarily a conscious determination to disconnect from traditional ideas of family or community. Rather, it has been an evolutionary process in which society has adapted to the dominant rhythms of industrial and urban establishments. The modern urban milieu has “created a state of anomie in people, which weakened their ties to the social order, be it family, neighbourhood, or religious institution” (Pols, 2003, p. 198).

Importantly, the phenomenon of anomie brings forth significant societal ramifications. Surrounded by multitudes of people focused on being autonomous, the individual becomes susceptible to feelings of anonymity, isolation and alienation (Powell, 1962, p. 156, p. 166; Coontz, 1995, pp. 1–2). In his work on anomie, Robert Merton describes it as an escape mechanism; the individual struggling with the urban context will turn to attitudes of “defeatism, quietism and resignation”, allowing the individual to “escape from the requirements of society” (1938, p. 678). Thus, anomie is also characterized by antisocial behaviour, where the individual recedes even further from the traditional idea of family and community.

Today, new forms of social connection such as social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.) have become a commonplace part of contemporary American society. These platforms are marketed as tools that encourage social interaction and make it easier for people to keep in touch. Social interaction has traditionally been understood as two or more people conversing face-to-face. However, these sites facilitate the exchange of personal information without the user needing to physically see another person or engage in conversation. On most social media platforms, the user is given the option to post statuses (or tweets, or captions) and this is typically used as a way of updating others on their latest news and opinions. Social media platforms arguably perpetuate the experience of anomie as they enable the individual to maintain their distance from the requirements of society. As social media platforms do not require face-to-face interaction, the individual essentially remains isolated from face-to-face social connections.

Before this, television was also seen as a medium that invokes notions of community. Not only are narratives centred around onscreen communities but television is a part of everyday life and invokes a sense of community among viewers. Gray Cavender notes that this sense of community “focuses less on shared values or geographical place, and instead is defined by technology and audience membership” (2004, p. 155). In other words, this sense of community is less defined by the physical locations of its members and more on what Graeme Turner describes as shared “form[s] of consciousness, a focus on belonging or identification” (2011). Cavender focuses his work on reality television and notes that at “the very time that there seems to be a diminution in community in the United States ... Reality TV programmes

frequently deploy the concept” (2004, p. 155). While he spends time showing how certain reality TV shows directly and indirectly appeal to notions of community, he also spends a considerable portion of the article presenting how the very same shows undermine “notions of a viable community” and identifies how “characters and situations are presented which are counterproductive to community” (2004, p. 155). Cavender makes the point that on shows such as *America’s Most Wanted* (2011–2012) or *Survivor*, “nothing is ever certain (or safe) for members of the community” (2004, p. 167). These shows exhibit how within a community “duplicity is the norm and trust and reciprocity are hard to find” (2004, p. 168). Perhaps to a less devastating degree this can also be seen in shows such as *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, *Catfish: The TV Show* (2012–), *King of the Nerds* (2013–2015), and to an extent, even *Edge of Alaska*, as the narratives present a lack of usual community standards because it had by lies, deceit, betrayal or the retraction of once-shared values. Thus, although television certainly appeals to notions of community, it also potentially perpetuates the experience of anomie as in many instances shows represent the vulnerability or breakdown of communities, which subsequently magnify the sense of society and morality being rejected.

Crucially, despite the prevalent condition of anomie in contemporary urban society, Skolnick identifies a contradictory characteristic of American culture: “American culture has always been marked by an ambivalent yearning for autonomy on the one hand and attachment to family and community on the other” (1991, p. 203). Skolnick unpacks this paradoxical situation by explaining as follows:

Americans have a stronger sense of both familistic values and family crisis than do other advanced countries. We have higher marriage rates, a more home-centred way of life, and greater public devotion to family values, yet also greater rates of instability—divorce, single-parent families, and teenage pregnancies—than other countries. (Skolnick, 1991, p. 219).

This means that although one may experience anomie and be a part of an environment where the traditional values of family and community are less pressing, there is a deeply embedded connection to the traditional sense of family and community. This is why rhetoric of family crisis has persisted as a theme in the American culture. Certain American television shows reflect this theme of families in crisis and seem to reassure the viewer that this is a common experience within contemporary American society. Television drama shows such as *Breaking*

Bad (2008–2013), *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) and *Weeds* (2005–2012) are based on a premise about dysfunctional families and families in crisis. While community-oriented sitcom shows such as *Cheers*, *Friends*, *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–), *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–2014) or *2 Broke Girls* (2011–2017) offer interesting examples of how television deals with urban alienation by presenting the friends as the new family. Essentially, these shows unravel the foundations of the traditional nuclear family by exposing and dealing with the precarious existence of families in present-day America. In doing this, these shows maintain the centrality of families on television and highlight how, despite the arguable disintegration of traditional family relations, the construct of families is still important in American culture.

Bearing in mind that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is predominantly consumed within urban environments and acknowledging the condition of anomie that prevails in these urban environments, it becomes clear how the representations of family in the programme can be read as a response to late capitalist urban life by serving as a source of consolation and hope for people whose own family lives do not reflect the traditional idealistic image of family and community. The programme offers an alternative space for the individual to escape, and within this space the individual is allowed to reconnect with ideals of family and community that are obsolete in an anomic context. In essence, watching the Kilcher family enjoy a close-knit family and community draws on a nostalgic sensibility. The programme evokes nostalgia by representing a context in which only traditional pre-industrial ideals of family and community are represented and no anomic characteristics are evident. In the absence of anomic characteristics, it becomes obvious how different present-day family and community structures are from those the programme represents. This realization potentially evokes a sense of loss, especially since American culture is attached to family and community, despite its contradictory celebration of autonomy (Skolnick, 1991, p. 203).

At the end of Episode 19, Season 4 (*Hardcore Homesteading*), Otto's monologue closes the episode and encompasses the dominant ideologies that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* demonstrates. The content of the monologue is also extremely antithetical to the characteristics of anomie, thereby highlighting how the programme presents a contrasting sense of family and community to that of the intended viewer.

Otto says:

Homesteading is hard but the upsides are the bonds we make, the friends we have and those absolutely novel and unique moments that you cannot get any other way but being out in the middle of being engaged in life and homesteading, for me, engages me in life on a daily basis.

Pause

For some reason, my parents pioneered their way to Alaska. They probably had a desire to do something better with their lives than to live in a crowded little Swiss village.

Pause

Homesteading takes more work but its way more satisfying and you are constantly in touch with your surroundings, you're constantly in touch with your neighbours. But it's a tiring and endlessly rewarding lifestyle.

The footage accompanying this monologue corroborates what Otto says and enhances the ideas of family and community that he describes. A group of about seven people are shown stacking the bales onto an over-loaded truck. They pass the bales to one another or catch the ones that fall off. The group seems happy as they laugh and chat while they work. The scene cuts to Otto as he explains that homesteading "engages him in life". He looks straight at the camera with an expression of sincerity and conviction. In this moment, Otto seems to speak directly to his audience, trying to convince them that his lifestyle is unquestionably beneficial to his wellbeing. As Otto's monologue continues, the scene cuts back to images of the group loading hay bales and Otto stands on top of the truck's load. Some bales dislodge under his feet and he falls from the truck, onto a pile of bales below. Some of the group laugh while others continue to load the truck. After a quick cut to Otto's interview, the scene ends with the camera zooming out slowly into a birds-eye-view shot of the homestead, and the episode comes to an end.

The ideologies communicated through Otto's monologue match those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are in opposition to the experience of anomie in urban environments. Otto argues that: (1) Social bonds are rewarding; (2) being engaged and in touch with all that one encounters is satisfying; and (3) it is better to live away from urban areas. Should these ideas be realized, the programme demonstrates that the individual will

experience fulfilment and wish for no other lifestyle. Furthermore, the visuals that accompany Otto's monologue illustrate the sense of engagement that he describes. The group of people are clearly committed to achieving the task of collecting hay bales; they help one another in stacking the bales and move across the pasture with a common goal. Thus, Otto's monologue and the visuals present an antithetical 'reality' to contemporary urban lifestyles. While the anomic individual feels isolated, anonymous and alienated, this scene highlights how extremely connected the characters are because of their engaging lifestyle. Moreover, the overall sense of happiness in the scene emphasises the sense of fulfilment that Otto describes and substantiates his recommendation for homesteading. Otto's monologue comes at the end of an episode that is packed with each character taking part in multiple strenuous tasks. The main theme in the episode is that the work required to live self-sufficiently is never-ending and strenuous. Otto's monologue serves as a reflection on the strenuous tasks witnessed by the audience. Rather than describing the events of the episode as arduous, gruelling or backbreaking, he offers descriptions that portray the content in a positive light, satisfying, rewarding, and engaging, and thereby presents them as desirable.

In an anomic context, the ideals represented on the programme are vastly different from reality, highlighting their absence in a present-day urban context. The programme creates awareness that urban society has lost the traditional ideals represented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*; thereby potentially generating nostalgia for what has been lost as a response to urban life. With this being said, despite the evidence of anomie being linked to urban environments, urban living cannot be entirely detrimental to its inhabitants. With its high population, abundant availability of public transport, social clubs, entertainment, and diversity, urban areas are potentially prime locations for experiencing meaningful social interactions and discovering examples of society and morality being valued rather than rejected. Although *Alaska: The Last Frontier* seems to respond to an anomic sensibility, it is not to say that every person experiences anomie as a result of urban living. Rather, it may be the case that communities and families are taking different forms in contemporary urban society that more traditional ideas do not account for.

Reifying Ideas of the Past

Essentially, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reifies the ideals of the past by providing an exemplary image of the pre-industrial family and community onscreen. This restoration of the past enables the individual to engage with the sense of kinship and community that present-day urban environments have apparently lost. The individual may have knowledge of pre-industrial American middle-class families having been close-knit and working together in order to survive, however, this knowledge is abstract and remains a reference to the past. The programme brings to life this knowledge and offers contemporary examples of how families can successfully lead an agrarian life and work together.

The visual and aural qualities of the televisual medium mean that the audience sees and hears the exhibition of traditional ideals. These qualities cause the abstract memories or knowledge of the past to materialise. Not only does the audience see the Kilcher family banding together on the homestead, but they also hear the characters substantiate the effectiveness of working together. As I have already discussed, Episode 8 of Season 4 (*Thanksgiving on the Homestead*) provides a clear example of the programme showing its audience how members of a community interact and what social cohesion and neighbourliness looks and sounds like. Whereas the viewer may have prior knowledge that pre-industrial communities were “close-knit” and have been “praised as fostering social cohesion and neighbourliness” (Pols, 2003, p. 194), the programme, in a sense, brings this knowledge to life. This reification of pre-industrial ideals offers ‘real’ and visceral images of a family who exist simultaneously to the audience.

Furthermore, certain televisual characteristics enhance the reification of traditional ideals as the viewer is taken into the pre-industrial-like world of the Kilcher family. In *Thanksgiving on the Homestead*, the audience is offered the opportunity to engage in the Thanksgiving celebration. Through a series of close-up shots of guests around the dining room table, the audience is drawn into the group, experiencing the overcrowded room, examining the weathered faces, and sharing in the undeniable sense of community. These serve as threads to provide the viewer with almost tangible and visceral material that aids them in reconnecting with images and ideals of the past. Thus, for those experiencing the breakdown of social bonds

in present-day America, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers comparative material for nostalgic reflection by embodying the idealised memories that nostalgia seeks to return to.

Alaska: The Last Frontier therefore evokes nostalgia for a lost sense of kinship and community by continuously presenting images that are reminiscent of an idealised pre-industrial-revolution American culture to a predominantly urban audience experiencing the breakdown of social bonds. In this chapter I have explored how the American structures of family and community had to evolve since the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation, and in doing so, I have established how traditional ideals of family and community seem to have fallen away in contemporary American culture. In response to this exploration I have illustrated how the images of traditional family and community structures offered by *Alaska: The Last Frontier* essentially reifies the ideals of the past and enables the individual to effectively engage with the sense of kinship and community that present-day urban environments seem to have lost.

I have also specifically underlined how, although present-day American nostalgia is commonly attributed to a yearning to recapture the 'Golden Age' of the 1950s nuclear family, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* looks past the 1950s and generates nostalgia for a more eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century idea of family and community. I have drawn attention to this point so as to establish precisely to which era *Alaska: The Last Frontier* refers, and more importantly, to reiterate how the programme undoubtedly draws parallels with an era aligned with America's pioneers and frontiersmen, an era that is perceived as defining the meaning of America.

To further understand the relationship between the urban setting in which the programme is largely consumed and the nostalgia for a sense of family and community that the programme generates, I also explored the condition of anomie; a condition commonly experienced by individuals living in urban environments. In this discussion I highlighted how by representing ideals vastly different from the ideals of contemporary urban society, the programme potentially offers a source of consolation and hope for people whose own lives are affected by anomie and who have experienced the breakdown of social bonds. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* therefore responds to the experience of contemporary urban life through depicting a sense of kinship and community that offers comparative material; material that is potentially used in reconnecting with a more traditional sense of what America means.

CHAPTER 4

THE EVOCATION OF NOSTALGIA THROUGH THE REPRESENTATION OF IDEAL LABOUR RELATIONS IN *ALASKA: THE LAST FRONTIER*

Central to every practice represented on *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is a process of labour. The programme is centred on the labours of subsistence living, and from these labours arise the narratives that make up each episode. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents labour as a voluntary activity that brings satisfaction to the worker. The practice of working is a spontaneous activity, embraced by the worker. In every task, the characters fully engage with the work that is required and when it is completed, the product or result belongs to the worker and their community. There is no division between the location of labour and the home. The characters work in order to build and maintain the homestead and the homestead is the reason that the characters have work and are able to live a self-sufficient lifestyle. In this chapter I will argue that the representation of labour in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* constructs a ‘fantasy of wholeness’ and that this process potentially evokes nostalgia for an idealised set of labour relations that are perceived to be lost in the late capitalist age.

To make this argument, the first part of this chapter will discuss Marx’s theory of estranged labour and the four types of alienation that he identifies as experienced by the worker under capitalist labour conditions (1978). In this section I will also establish how in the present age of late capitalism, Marx’s nineteenth-century descriptions of capitalist labour conditions and their effects remain evident and are in some cases magnified. I will then move on to consider the lifestyle television genre and its role in the representation of idealised labour relations and the evocation of nostalgia through *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. This section will also examine how the didactic elements of the lifestyle genre offers the nostalgic viewer a space to ‘learn’ how to achieve a sense of fulfilment and potentially ‘equips’ the nostalgic viewer to transform from a nostalgic state and attain contentment. Finally, I will present a case study from *Alaska: The Last Frontier* to show how the programme constructs a ‘fantasy of wholeness’ through representing idealised labour relations that are in stark contrast to Marx’s theory of how the contemporary urban viewer in a late capitalist age experiences labour. I will also show how characteristics of the lifestyle television genre facilitate the representation of this ‘fantasy of wholeness’ and the

subsequent evocation of nostalgia. This exploration shows that the programme is not merely a nostalgia-inducing text, but rather a text that inadvertently stirs a sense of yearning for the rejection of capitalist labour structures and provides examples of how to work differently and why to work differently.

Fantasy of Wholeness

In formulating the phrase 'fantasy of wholeness', I have used the term 'fantasy' intentionally so as to acknowledge that the programme's display of 'wholeness' is more imaginative than realistic and that it is primarily a reflection of human desires rather than what is, in fact, realistically attainable. In using the term 'fantasy' I have also made a deliberate reference to how nostalgia functions within the human mind. In her definition of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym argues that nostalgia employs the imagination to engage with fantasies rather than reality (2001, Introduction, para. 3). In this context, the programme employs imaginings of the past to engage in fantasies of labour fulfilment. The idealised representations of pre-capitalist labour practices offer an alternative reality that juxtaposes the supposedly less fulfilling experiences of contemporary labour conditions. Thus, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* provides a televisual fantasy that allows for nostalgia to engage in the idea of a more appealing reality.

I base my use of the term 'wholeness' on the concept of experiencing absolute emotional contentment and fulfilment. The antithetical scenario to my understanding of wholeness would be experiences of confusion, indecisiveness, dissatisfaction, and perhaps even depression. Thus, a scenario where the individual experiences wholeness would mean that the individual is unaffected by any negative influence and is in a state of absolute contentment and fulfilment. In this vein, my concept of wholeness also relates to the labour experience and how certain conditions within the labour process supposedly affect the emotional wellbeing of the labourer. For most people, in any situation, the experience of absolute wholeness is unattainable. Specifically, for the contemporary urban viewer in our present late capitalist age, the idealised labour relations represented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* are significantly unattainable. Despite the impossibility of attaining absolute emotional wholeness, the 'fantasy of wholeness' portrayed through the programme offers the viewer an idea to which they may

aspire or derive hope from in their yearning to feel more comfortable in their reality. It may also offer a space where they can reflect critically on the labour conditions of their urban lives.

Ideal Labour, Estranged Labour and Late Capitalist Labour Conditions

Alaska: The Last Frontier represents the Kilcher family as a group of people who are thoroughly content with the lifestyle they lead. The programme is centred on the labour of subsistence living and represents this labour as a voluntary activity that brings satisfaction to each character. Whether it is an exciting construction project, a gruelling cattle drive or a menial domestic chore, positive reinforcement of their labours exudes from each character throughout Season 4. Admittedly, characters express some frustrations through their interviews; however, the praise for their lifestyle, and all it entails, outweighs the negative aspects. As each episode draws to a close and all tasks have successfully been completed, any ill feeling toward the hardships of their labours have been negated by constant explanations as to why or how the characters receive immense gratification. The characters are portrayed as fulfilled in every way. Through this process the programme constructs a scenario that implies ultimate fulfilment and happiness is obtained through living according to a particular set of principles and practices, to which engaging in labour is central.

The representations of labour relations in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* do not, however, reflect the labour relations experienced in America's present late capitalist age. Contemporary urban experiences of labour are more aligned with Karl Marx's descriptions of capitalist labour. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx presents his theory on 'the estrangement of labour', based on the idea that human beings are inherently "active and creative beings" and that through "productive activity" we can "develop and fulfil ourselves" (Sayers, 2011, p. 67). In presenting his argument Marx describes the characteristics of what he regards as ideal labour conditions and contrasts these to his observations on the experiences of capitalist labour conditions.

It is worth noting that Marx's own views did not support ideas of nostalgia. He considered history a progression of stages that develop their own "gradation[s] of social rank" and inventions that eventually lead to their own downfall (Marx, 1978, p. 474) and based on this understanding, he supported the rise of capitalism in Europe. As literature professor Marcos

Piason Natali notes: “[Marx]rested on the conviction that [capitalism] was destined to bring about the emancipation of the working class and, by extension, of all of humanity” (2004, p. 15). In *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx detailed the rise of capitalist industry and commerce through the bourgeois society (Reader, pp. 474–479) and proceeded to describe the inevitable fall of this model by identifying how through an “epidemic of over-production” (Reader, p. 478) the proletariat will rise and be liberated from the bourgeois ruling class (Reader, pp. 482–483). Thus, Marx believed that “history is the narrative of progress toward an improved state” (Natali, 2004, p. 18) and being attached to the past would therefore imply a desire for “a world which is less just” (Natali, 2004, p. 14). He considered those who try to “roll back the wheel of history” conservative and reactionary (Reader, p. 482) and assumed a “connection between nostalgia and the preservation of privilege” (Natali, 2004, p. 13). Marx’s critique is therefore of a political nature based on a concern for social justice. Nostalgia, however, can also be considered a “symptom of the real unease caused by an unjust society” and should the cause of dissatisfaction be done away with, nostalgia would disappear (Natali, 2004, p. 18). It is from this angle that I use Marx’s theories on ‘estranged labour’ and ‘ideal labour’ by applying theories of nostalgia to this information in an exploration of how capitalist labour conditions can potentially evoke a yearning for the past.

Evidently, enormous global and national changes have taken place since Marx presented his theories. America is currently in a ‘late capitalist’ period, which is the latest stage in the development of capitalism and a substantially different environment to the one Marx based his theories on. More recently, shifts in the labour environment have been brought on through the digital disruption of economies and working relations. New digital technologies and business models promote a sharing economy and service economy, making many forms of trade dependent on the products and services provided by the internet and other digital systems and not on human labour. Thus, artificial intelligence threatens to displace most forms of labour and holds the potential for a global labour crisis. Despite these significant changes, however, theorists have argued that Marx’s theories on labour are still relevant to our contemporary late capitalist society.

In his work on late capitalism, neoliberal globalization, and militarism, Harry Targ argues that Marx’s theories on capitalist labour conditions remain applicable in contemporary urban

society and in some cases have been magnified (2006, pp. 12–15). Targ expounds on five key features of late capitalism that have emerged since the 1980s and are clearly linked to Marx's theories on capitalist labour conditions. These key features are:

- (1) Capitalism has become more concentrated with an increase in economic power in the manufacturing, service and financial sectors (2006, pp. 15–17).
- (2) Fordism of the early twentieth century has turned to Post-Fordism which is a system “based on super-exploitation of workers often in overseas sweatshops, and the sale of higher priced goods and services to smaller sectors of the population with higher incomes than the traditional working class” (2006, pp. 17–19). The higher priced goods do not exclude the lower income worker from purchasing them; therefore, with an increase in consumerism across the income brackets an increase in debt has occurred (2006, p. 18).
- (3) There has also been growing inequality in the distribution of wealth and income (2006, pp. 19–21).
- (4) Due to a general stagnation in wages, there has been a decline in general living conditions (2006, pp. 21–23).
- (5) Finally, as a result of an enormous change in the relations of production, the working class have been further “marginalised, “deskilled” and “fragmented” (2006, p. 23).

These changes have emerged because of the following reasons:

The introduction of technology, just-in-time production schemes, downsizing and shifting production overseas, Post-Fordist policies, transforming work, the shift from production to service, and decentralizing production facilities and service outlets. (Targ, 2006, p. 24)

All of which place a greater focus on the production of commodities and diminish focus on the wellbeing of the worker. Fundamentally, all five of these late capitalist features reflect an increase in the detrimental effects of labour for the working class, thereby augmenting Marx's points and underlining the relevance of Marx's capitalist ideas in our present late capitalist age. In addition, Marx's concept of ideal labour conditions bears striking resemblance to the depiction of labour on *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, which makes sense given the pre-industrial,

pre-capitalist lifestyle depicted onscreen. This exploration ultimately supports my argument that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* constructs a fantasy of wholeness and that this process potentially evokes nostalgia for an idealised set of labour relations that are perceived to be lost in the late capitalist age.

Marx contends that for labour to be fulfilling, the worker should be engaged and have control over the whole process of creating the product. Through this process, the product becomes an expression of the worker and a part of the worker is reflected in the product of labour:

The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man's species-life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he sees himself in a world that he has created. (Marx, 1986, p. 42)

Thus, through the process of labour the worker chooses to express a part of him or herself. This part of the worker is brought to 'life' and is considered an extension of the worker. This description of labour also indicates that the worker should have control of the labour process, which means that the worker determines the product and its design, the duration and intensity of labour, and to an extent, the quality of the product. Thus, the worker is intellectually engaged with the entire labour process and its product. As Ernst Fischer describes in *Marx in His Own Words*, this idea of labour is predominantly associated with pre-capitalism "before the personal relationship of the craftsman to his product began to change with the manufacturing systems, in which division of labour began to dominate" (1977, p. 40). With this change, time and money became critical factors in the production of commodities; thus, the thoughtful (and time-consuming) nature of Marx's idea of ideal labour conditions became unrealistic for capitalist values. These characteristics of ideal labour conditions reveal that 'wholeness' is not only related to emotional contentment and fulfilment but influences one's feelings or attitude to labour. 'Wholeness' also relates to a much more practical side of the labour experience as the individual needs to be engaged, intellectually and physically, in a whole labour process to gain a sense of fulfilment.

Alaska: The Last Frontier reflects both Marx's set of ideal labour conditions and represents the sense of fulfilment that Marx describes as being the result of ideal labour relations. The characters are engaged with whole labour processes and their obvious (and self-proclaimed) sense of emotional wholeness is attributed to their labour. Through relating Marx's idea of

ideal labour with the labour represented on *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, I think it important to point out that the term 'ideal' is not so much related to the nature of labour that the characters perform, but that their labour process facilitates the individual's sense of fulfilment and is thus ideal. Whether or not the viewer idealises the nature of labour performed by the characters relates to the individual subject and their preferences.

I established in Chapter 1 that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is largely consumed in urban environments in America, and since the industrial revolution urban environments are characterized by capitalist or late capitalist structures. Thus, the pre-capitalist images of ideal labour relations depicted in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* are presented to an audience who may be experiencing dissatisfaction with capitalist and late capitalist labour conditions. These conditions were initially presented in Karl Marx's theory of 'estranged labour' (1978) where he argues that in a capitalist environment labour conditions eliminate the positive relationship between the worker and their work. This occurs primarily because capitalist values are focused on mass production of commodities and the acquisition of wealth, which are impossible to achieve following Marx's descriptions of ideal labour conditions. In our present context, products of labour are not only external and distanced from the worker but are also largely intangible and digital, thus arguably subjecting the worker to worse labour conditions and therefore a magnified sense of discontent.

Marx argues that through capitalist labour conditions the worker becomes "all the poorer the more wealth he produces" and that "labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity" (Marx, 1986, p. 37). Here, Marx uses the word 'poor' to describe both the financial state and the emotional state of the worker. Not only is the worker subject to a low wage but also the meaningful relationship between the worker and work is eliminated. As a result, he explains that the worker becomes estranged from their labour. The term 'alienation' is used to describe the experience of estrangement and Marx describes this experience as thus:

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, the fact that labor is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy

but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him—that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity—so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (Marx, 1986, p. 39)

This excerpt unpacks the experience of the worker under capitalist labour conditions and foregrounds the absence of control over the labour process that Marx regards as essential for the satisfaction of the worker. He describes capitalist labour as lacking in stimulation for the worker, and therefore, the workplace becomes a location of stagnation, a place that the worker frequents only out of necessity. The workplace is a place of discomfort; therefore, the worker disassociates themselves from the workplace and creates a divide between work and the home. Importantly, in Chapter 2 I discussed that capitalist labour conditions have also affected 'home' and have altered the experience of kinship, community and the domestic space. Thus, these constructs are no longer implicitly loci of emotional contentment either, which means that the individual is potentially alienated in the two spheres that are predominantly inhabited day-to-day. In a pre-capitalist scenario, work and labour were not separated and formed one 'whole' life. In capitalist conditions however, the workplace and the home are separated, cleaving open this wholeness.

This sense of separation is exacerbated in the workplace as the relationship between the worker and the object of labour is broken down because there is no personalization, control, or creativity required by the worker. The worker only need invest time and energy into their

product of labour, however, even these investments are taken away as the object is removed on its completion. In relation to Marx's understanding of alienation, Edward Reiss writes, "alienation can be understood as an *experience* of feeling dehumanized, when human needs go unmet. This feeling of alienation may involve stress, exhaustion, poverty and chronic lack of fulfilment" (1997, p. 16). Thus, capitalist labour conditions, for Marx, are ultimately detrimental to the worker and cause feelings of discontent, dissatisfaction and unhappiness—all of which make for an environment in which nostalgia is appealing.

Marx identifies four types of alienation that transpire from capitalist labour conditions. This information provides useful material to use in my case study and aids in showing how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents labour relations that stand in stark contrast to those experienced by people working under late capitalist labour conditions.

1) Alienation of the Worker from Their Work and Its Product

The first type of alienation is that of the worker from their work and its product. This stems from Marx's viewpoint that the worker is related to the product of labour because the worker "puts his life into the object" (Marx, 1986, p. 37). In a pre-capitalist environment, the worker would create an object for personal use, thereby retaining the ownership of the object. This process conjures an image of wholeness, as the worker pours energy into the object's creation, and in turn, the object becomes of use to the worker. In a capitalist working environment, however, the relationship between the worker and the product is removed. The worker is estranged from the object of labour:

The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. (Marx, 1986, p. 38)

This type of alienation clearly refers to the lack of control that the worker has over the object of labour. Marx identifies the necessity for the worker to engage in the design and planning of the commodity, however, capitalist labour conditions dictate that the worker works without

any personal input in the creation. In this scenario the worker's sense of wholeness is disrupted as he or she is separated from the object of labour on a practical level.

2) Alienation of the Worker from Working and Production

This type of alienation refers to the lack of control that the worker under capitalist working conditions has over the labour process. With this type of alienation in mind, Marx describes capitalist labour as follows:

... *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind (Marx, 1986, p. 39)

The term 'intrinsic nature' refers to Marx's viewpoint that for humans, conscious productive activity (labour) is a natural practice that distinguishes humans from animals. He describes animals to be "immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*" (Marx, 1986, p. 41). Humans, on the other hand, are free to choose an activity: "Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness ... his own life is an object for him" (Marx, 1986, p. 41). In other words, an animal's activity is dictated by their instinct, there is no choice, but humans are in control of their actions and through this control, they have the freedom to choose whether or not they engage in activity and they choose the duration, design, intensity and medium of the activity. It is for these reasons that Marx describes natural human activity as "free activity". When the worker has control over labour, Marx poses that the work process can be affirming, fulfilling and stimulating for the worker.

Estranged labour, however, reverses the constructive relationship between work and the worker. Under capitalist labour conditions the worker is not in control of the labour required. The worker follows instruction from those in management positions who determine the duration, design, intensity and medium of the labour. The worker is thus denied the freedom to make any creative contribution to the labour process or its product. Labour becomes merely a "means to his *existence*" (Marx, 1986, p. 42) for the worker. As a result, the worker is alienated from the work itself and for the worker there is little meaning in the activity that consumes a large part of their life.

This sense of alienation is heightened by what Marx terms the 'division of labour' (Marx, 1986, p. 171). The term refers to a capitalist phenomenon where "labour evolved a multitude of one-sided activities; in order to expand production, it was necessary to narrow down individual work processes" (Fischer, 1977, p. 37). In other words, the division of labour refers to the assignment of parts of a process to different people for the purpose of manufacturing commodities more rapidly. In *Marx: A Clear Guide*, Reiss describes the division of labour to be a characteristic of capitalism that exacerbates alienation because "people are told to specialise: to develop some parts of [their] personality at the expense of others" (1997, p. 20). Thus, specialisation alienates the worker from the labour process because the worker only performs a section of the manufacturing process. The worker is not a part of the whole process, only a segment of it.

Furthermore, specialisation can lead to the worker becoming unnecessary to the manufacturing process as specialised machinery is introduced:

It replaces labor by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back into barbarous types of labor and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism. (Marx, 1986, p. 39)

Thus, the division of labour worsens the experience of alienation. The worker's regimented labour assignment magnifies the monotonous nature of capitalist working conditions and isolates the worker from any potential to diversify skill. Specialisation reduces the potential for the worker to be useful in other areas of production and this dilemma is accentuated by the introduction of specialised machinery into the production process. The worker is thus of equal value to the specialised machine and the need for the worker is further reduced. In our current context, this threat to human labour is increasing as machines are rapidly replacing workers entirely. Ultimately, the division of labour further estranges the worker from the labour process and jeopardises the worker's job security, therefore compromising the worker's survival.

In the pre-capitalist age on the other hand, the division of labour was either non-existent or limited, as Fischer explains:

Every workman had to be versed in a whole round of tasks, had to be able to make everything that was to be made with his tools. The limited commerce and the scanty communication between the individual towns, the lack of population and the narrow needs did not allow for a higher division of labour, and therefore every man who wished to become a master had to be proficient in the whole of his craft. (1977, p. 40)

These characteristics of pre-capitalism align with Marx's descriptions of how labour should be practised. Essentially, where capitalist labour conditions resemble fragmentation, disconnection and stagnation for the worker, pre-capitalist labour conditions resemble wholeness, continuity, relationship and skill acquisition. Fischer places emphasis on the 'whole' craft, drawing attention to how pre-capitalist workers needed to be skilled in a spectrum of practices in order to complete an entire labour process. In emphasising the whole craft, Fischer aligns his argument with Marx's thoughts on pre-capitalist labour practices and their association with the emotional wholeness of the worker.

Furthermore, Fischer's description of pre-capitalist labour not only offers an opposing description of capitalist labour conditions, but it also describes the way in which labour is represented in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. The language Marx uses to describe the effects of capitalist labour is marked by exclusion, separation and loss. On the other hand, the understanding of pre-capitalist labour is one of continuity, connection and wholeness. The characters on *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflect these characteristics of continuity, connection, and 'whole craft', as they demonstrate all of the skills needed to complete their tasks. Thus, the programme demonstrates the absence of division of labour and offers an example of wholeness.

3) Alienation of the Worker from Their 'Species-Being' or from Humanity and Human Potential

The third type of alienation is the worker being alienated from what it means to be human. Marx uses the term 'species-being' to refer to human nature, or what it means to be human. Animal activity is purely based on immediate needs. Humans, on the other hand, "produce universally" (Marx, 1986, p. 42), which means that they are able to identify the needs of all species and attempt to produce for these needs. Thus, humans produce "even when he [they]

is [are] free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom” (Marx, 1986, p. 42). In their consciousness of other species and their standards, humans also produce “in accordance with the laws of beauty”, which refers to the creative aspect of production that humans naturally exercise (Marx, 1986, p. 42). The individual’s conscious choice of life activity is therefore part of the essence of humanity.

For labor, *life activity, productive life* itself, appears to man in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character. Life itself appears only as a *means to life* (Marx, 1986, p. 41).

Thus, according to Marx, the whole character of humanity is contained in the freedom and consciousness of their life activity. In capitalist working conditions, the creativity and freedom of production is taken away, and thereby specifically human aspects of labour is taken away. In essence, this means that the human subject is separated from its true self and is not whole. This type of alienation is a cumulative effect of the first and second types of alienation that I have discussed. Through the alienation of the worker from their work and its product and in the absence of vital elements required for fulfilling labour, the worker is estranged from a fundamental characteristic of humanity, thereby estranging the worker from their species-being.

4) Alienation of the Worker from Other Workers

As a result of the worker being alienated from their labour, its product, and their species-being, Marx identifies a fourth type of alienation: The alienation of the worker from other workers. He describes it as “... the proposition that man’s species-nature is estranged from him means that one man is estranged from the other, as each of them is from man’s essential nature” (Marx, 1986, p. 43). This means that if the worker is feeling estranged from humanity, undoubtedly the worker will feel alienated from other workers who are part of humanity.

Marx also argues that human relations are a creation of human labour and that “what applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labour and to himself, also holds of a

man's relation to the other man, and to the other man's labor and object of labor" (Marx, 1986, p. 42). In other words, Sean Sayers explains, "labour is objectified" in human relations "just as it is in material objects" (2011, pp. 81–82). Thus, social relations should provide the individual with the same affirmation as does free activity. However, in conditions of alienation, Sayers describes human relations as becoming "independent of us and opposed to us" (2011, pp. 81–82). Just as the worker is alienated from the process of labour and its object, so is the worker to human relations. In experiencing this type of alienation, a sense of wholeness in human relations is broken and the worker is separated from a natural affinity. Once again, the experience of capitalist labour conditions is marked by separation and is in sharp contrast to the pre-capitalist characteristics of social unity and connection demonstrated in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*.

Ideal Labour Relations and the Evocation of Nostalgia Through *Alaska: The Last Frontier*

The representation of labour in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* could not be more different from Marx's (1986) description of capitalist labour relations and their effects on the worker. The characters are represented as in control of every facet of their production processes and own their products of labour. Consequently, each character is secure in their species-being and displays unwavering unity with their fellow characters. Furthermore, each character exhibits the characteristic outcomes of ideal labour relations: Contentment, mental and physical stimulation, engagement in work, and satisfaction. *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of ideal labour relations result in an overarching sense of wellness and fulfilment that serve to construct a fantasy of wholeness.

The core fantasy of the nostalgic person is to access an emotional state of contentment that is imagined to have existed or exists in an alternative time or space (Boym, 2001, Introduction, para. 10). Thus, the programme offers the nostalgic viewer an example of their core fantasy by representing an environment in which each character seems completely content. For the nostalgic viewer this dichotomy can evoke a sense of loss, because the experience of their capitalist reality lacks the image of wholeness that the programme represents. Therefore, the ideal labour relations represented on the programme potentially evokes nostalgia and consequently highlights their absence in the late capitalist age.

Pertinent to this argument is the fact that the programme offers the nostalgic viewer an example of their core fantasy. The fantasy reflected onscreen emulates the sense of emotional wholeness perceived to be lost in the nostalgic viewer and provides an example of what the viewer yearns to recapture. Those experiencing nostalgia seek to access alternative times and spaces that seem to provide a more emotionally comfortable environment and *Alaska: The Last Frontier* provides this alternative space. Thus, the programme not only evokes nostalgia, but also provides the nostalgic viewer with material to work with in their pursuit for contentment. The characters demonstrate how to work in a way that opposes capitalist working practices and what the emotional result will be after following their example. Offering these examples means that the programme is not merely a nostalgia-inducing text, but rather, a text that inadvertently stirs a sense of yearning for the rejection of capitalist labour structures and that provides examples of how to work differently and why to work differently. I am not suggesting that the creators of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* endeavour to overthrow capitalism and reinstate precapitalistic practices. Essentially, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is a product of capitalism and entrenched within a capitalist system of production and distribution. Rather, I argue that through capturing the 'reality' of the Kilcher family and their relations to labour practices, the show represents certain truths that seem solely entertaining or nostalgia-stirring yet can potentially be read as a subtle critique of the present-day American urban context. The programme offers the nostalgic viewer tools for either engaging in reflective nostalgia or restorative nostalgia. The nostalgic viewer is offered the information that can facilitate the reflection on what seems to be lost and the knowledge to implement alternative practices in order to regain contentment (reflective nostalgia), or the information provided may be used for pursuing the exact same lifestyle that the Kilcher family demonstrate onscreen in order to acquire their portrayed contentment (restorative nostalgia).

Granted, the chances of nostalgic viewers spurning their urban lifestyles and resigning from their source of monetary income to take up living self-sufficiently in a remote part of Alaska are unlikely. Any attempt to live a 'Kilcher' way of life essentially relies upon the ownership of land and this is an impossible objective for many. Furthermore, the Kilcher way of life is represented as a choice, as if viewers have a choice in whether or not they are incorporated into a capitalist labour system. *Alaska: The Last Frontier* represents freedom and wholeness as

inextricably aligned with American pioneer life, yet at the same time co-opts freedom within a capitalist system by being on the programme. Thus, the show both has its cake and eats it. It critiques a capitalist system while at the same time supporting it. I think it best to perceive the information conveyed by *Alaska: The Last Frontier* as material for the nostalgic viewer to use in their pursuit of access to a more emotionally comfortable lifestyle. The programme serves as a spotlight for the nostalgic viewer, revealing precisely what values have apparently been lost in the current late capitalist age and identifying values that the individual may want to recover in order to regain a sense of emotional wholeness.

Lifestyle Television's Role in Representing Idealised Labour in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*

Alaska: The Last Frontier falls under the reality television genre and has its roots embedded in the subgenre of lifestyle television. Using Annette Hill's (2005) and Charlotte Brunsdon's (2003) work, I will examine how characteristics of the lifestyle television genre facilitate the representations of labour in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and how these idealised representations of labour facilitate the evocation of nostalgia. Specifically, the narratives of transformation and the emphasis placed on the improvement or acquisition of personal wellbeing in lifestyle television programmes facilitate the positive representation of labour. These transformations offer continuous examples of the benefits and success encountered through engaging in labour. I will also discuss how for the nostalgic viewer, the didactic nature of lifestyle television provides an opportunity to 'learn' how to effectively engage in labour for the purpose of accessing the personal wellbeing represented by the characters.

Hill comments that lifestyle television is a "consumer-based reality format" that typically contains "an informative address to the viewer alongside personal stories" (2005, p. 91). This description encompasses what *Alaska: The Last Frontier* ultimately offers its viewers: A programme that follows the self-sufficient lifestyle of the Kilcher family in Alaska and informs the viewer on how the family sustains their lifestyle. Hill's concise description of lifestyle television provides an overall understanding of the genre, however, Brunsdon extends our understanding by differentiating between older and newer lifestyle programmes. She argues that overall, whether the programme focuses on "gardening, cooking" or "'do-it yourself' (home improvement)", lifestyle programmes convey a "narrative of transformation"

(Brunsdon, 2003, p. 10). Hill echoes Brunsdon's finding when explaining that the predominant function of lifestyle programmes is to offer "advice and tips on how to makeover your home, relationship, business, health and personal well-being" (Hill, 2005, p. 79). Hill uses the term 'makeover' and Brunsdon uses the term 'transformation', however, both imply a process of change taking place onscreen and a key component of each transformation is the desire for the individual to gain an improved sense of personal wellbeing (Hill, 2005, p. 79). From these descriptions, it would seem that for a transformation to be whole (or complete), the viewer must witness the transformation from one state to another. This process means not only that the transformation itself is complete, but the narrative also comes to its conclusion. Furthermore, the viewer witnesses the subject shift from a state of incompleteness to a state of emotional wholeness. The viewer's experience is thus made whole at the same time as the programme's subject is made whole.

In Brunsdon's differentiation between older and newer lifestyle programmes, the most prominent difference between the two is that older programmes focused on transformation through the course of skill acquisition (2003, p. 10). This means that the programmes emphasised the undertaking of acquiring a new skill, and through this development, transformation took place. More contemporary programmes on the other hand, place emphasis on the result of the transformative process (Brunsdon, 2003, p. 10). Brunsdon argues that newer programmes still employ didactic elements by showing the viewer "how to perform certain operations", but the emphasis is primarily placed on 'the reveal' and the didactic elements are "narratively subordinated to an instantaneous display of transformation" (Brunsdon, 2003, p. 10). In other words, "the new hybrid formats seek to transform instruction into entertainment through the addition of surprise, excitement and suspense" (Brunsdon, 2003, p. 9).

In the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, characteristics of both older and more contemporary lifestyle programmes are employed. The programme blends a strong didactic address that focuses on the lengthy process of skill acquisition or goal achievement with an equally strong focus on the narrative of personal stories. However, despite *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* informative address, the trajectory of the programme is not to provide an instructive guide on how to live self-sufficiently. Rather, the programme blends an entertaining narrative of

personal stories with an informative tone. The didactic elements are incorporated in the narrative as characters provide information on how to perform the tasks that they demonstrate onscreen.

Unlike most contemporary lifestyle programmes, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents few radical transformations; yet, transformation is a central feature of the programme. The programme does not have a dramatic reveal, typical of makeover formats, but rather, throughout each episode there are subtle narratives of transformation driven by the characters' desire for personal wellbeing. These transformations facilitate the positive representation of labour by offering continuous examples of how the characters benefit from and succeed in engaging in the labour that brings about transformation. This idea of transformation relates to Marx's work as it emphasises that the individual's sense of wellbeing is associated with frequent involvement in labour. Furthermore, there are few examples of transformations having failed or transformations having a negative effect in the programme. This contributes to the fantasy of wholeness conveyed through the programme's representation of labour, as the idea of labour being continually successful and absolutely fulfilling on all accounts is in essence illusory.

There are three levels of narratives of transformation in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. Firstly, the history of the Kilcher family is one of personal transformation. The origins of the Kilcher family are built on transformation through Yule Kilcher turning away from conventional twentieth-century society in Switzerland and relocating to Alaska in order to pursue a more peaceful and self-sufficient lifestyle. This transformation has already taken place, however, the story of Yule's choice to change his life radically is repeated throughout each season of the programme and each episode is centred on the continuation of Yule's legacy. Fundamentally, Yule turned to a lifestyle involving continuous labour for the purpose of acquiring personal wellbeing. By virtue of the Kilcher family having survived for generations and now thriving onscreen, the narrative of Yule's transformation positively represents a certain approach to labour.

Secondly, nearly every activity performed by the characters onscreen leads to a type of transformation. These transformations are subtle, however, on completion many of the activities take the Kilcher family's self-sufficient lifestyle from unviable to viable. Other tasks demonstrated involve characters creating a useful object out of discarded material or using every bit of a slaughtered animal so that nothing goes to waste. In these cases, the characters

transform useless material into something useful or turn something broken into something whole. As a result of this kind of work, the characters seem to become more whole and expresses their enthusiasm and sense of achievement through engaging in meaningful labour. This gratification demonstrates Marx's concept of ideal labour: Not only does the object of labour become whole at the hand of the worker, but the worker is shown to gain an improved sense of wellbeing or wholeness.

Paired with a strong didactic address the onscreen transformations facilitate an opportunity for the viewer to 'learn' how to effectively engage in labour and access the sense of personal wellbeing represented by the characters. The characters show the viewer how to perform and succeed in certain tasks and in doing this the viewer is 'taught' how to emulate the Kilchers' labour practices. In *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*, Hill dedicates a chapter to discuss the idea of learning through reality television programmes. She concludes that when a reality programme adopts "a didactic tone, and tells audiences how to do something, the audiences are more open in their acknowledgement of learning from reality programming" (2005, p. 100). Although I discuss Hill's theory in more detail in Chapter One, it is important that I point out the likelihood of the viewer being engaged in the idea of learning how to emulate the labour practices demonstrated onscreen. The transformations demonstrated are not necessarily radical or instantaneously life changing; however, they are still driven by the desire to either improve or maintain a sense of personal wellbeing and the didactic tone of each narrative assists the viewer in assimilating how to access the fantasy of wholeness depicted onscreen. The instructional material of the programme offers the learner an opportunity to examine precisely what type of labour the characters engage in and how they approach each activity.

Thirdly, the didactic elements and focus on the acquisition of personal wellbeing does more than facilitating the positive representation of labour relations in the programme and the subsequent evocation of nostalgia. These characteristics of the lifestyle genre also create a space for the nostalgic viewer to imagine or vicariously enjoy a sense of transformation. From the outset, lifestyle programming is inherently aligned with a nostalgic viewer's yearning for an improved sense of personal wellbeing. Through the idyllic images of complete wellness and fulfilment represented by the programme, the nostalgic viewer is presented with examples of

a core fantasy. The didactic address accompanying each narrative of transformation means that the programme offers more to the nostalgic viewer than merely stirring feelings of yearning for an alternative reality. The didactic address offers the nostalgic viewer an opportunity to engage with information that has the potential to equip them to acquire an improved sense of personal wellbeing. Granted, the nostalgic viewer may choose to remain in a state of yearning for an alternative reality and existing in a state of melancholia, but the didactic tone of the programme encourages a more functional approach to the acquisition of wellbeing and fulfilment. The nostalgic viewer is offered information to either engage in reflective nostalgia and examine the practices or values of the characters onscreen, incorporating the appealing parts in the viewer's reality; or to engage in restorative nostalgia and endeavour to mirror the lifestyle of the characters in order to acquire the same sense of fulfilment that they portray onscreen. These material responses to the text are most unlikely for material and practical reasons; however, the programme offers information in abundance and appears to be enough to equip the viewer for a drastic transformation in lifestyle. Realistically, the viewer may engage in a negotiated response where they might apply some of the practices represented onscreen to their everyday life but remain within the urban capitalist context.

Thus, through the narratives of transformation and their didactic tone, the viewer is offered idealised images of the maintenance and improvement of personal wellbeing for the characters on the programme. For the nostalgic viewer, these idealised images reflect what nostalgia creates a yearning for and paired with the instructional nature of the narratives, offers knowledge on how to access an improved sense of fulfilment or wholeness.

In this chapter so far, I have shown how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents a text that displays examples of ideal labour relations to an audience who most likely experience unfulfilling labour conditions characteristic of the late capitalist age. I have argued that these images of ideal labour relations construct a fantasy of wholeness by reflecting a context where the characters seem completely satisfied and emotionally fulfilled because of their lifestyle that is centred on the labours of subsistence living. Using Karl Marx's (1978, 1986) and Harry Targ's (2006) work, I hope to have shown how the ideal labour practices represented on the programme seem to be far more satisfying than the labour conditions experienced by contemporary urban viewers.

Based on this discussion, I have argued that the programme's images of wholeness potentially evoke nostalgia for an idealised set of labour relations that are perceived to be lost in our late capitalist age. I have discussed how the images of wholeness are certainly a fantasy as the probability of anyone attaining absolute emotional wholeness is slim. However, I have emphasised that the fantasy of wholeness offers the viewer an ideal to which they may aspire or derive hope from in their yearning to feel more comfortable in their reality.

Furthermore, I have discussed three characteristics of the lifestyle television genre that are evident in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and that facilitate the representations of labour and the subsequent evocation of nostalgia. I have argued that the narratives of transformation and the emphasis placed on the improvement or acquisition of personal wellbeing offer continuous examples of the benefits and success encountered through engaging in labour. Additionally, I have explored how the didactic nature of lifestyle television facilitates an opportunity for the viewer to 'learn' how to effectively engage in enriching labour practices and address their desire for an improved sense of wellbeing.

Learning to be 'Whole': Representations of Ideal Labour Relations in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*

In Episode 16 of *Alaska: The Last Frontier* titled *Snowy Roundup*, Eivin demonstrates how he makes two knives from old pieces of scrap. This narrative is of particular interest because it features Eivin's unequivocally positive attitude toward engaging in labour and represents a scenario that is the opposite of the fragmented labour experience aligned with late capitalism. The narrative also clearly exhibits how certain characteristics of the lifestyle television genre facilitate this idealised representation of labour. In Episode 9 of Season 4 (*Secrets of the Range Rider*), Eve and Charlotte preserve smoked salmon. This narrative demonstrates how the programme presents a strong didactic address that offers information that is potentially useful for the nostalgic viewer to address their condition. By identifying the fantasy of wholeness depicted in these narratives, I will show how the programme may provide a nostalgic fantasy for viewers who regularly experience late capitalist labour conditions.

The knife-making narrative is divided into three acts, interspersed by segments of other narratives in the episode, and in each act, the focus is on a different part of Eivin's labour process. I will take each of the three acts and examine them separately. In doing this, I will

show how each represents images of wellbeing that are clearly a result of engaging in idealised pre-industrial labour practices. I will then move on to the salmon-preserving narrative and examine how the viewer is offered an opportunity to 'learn' how to engage in labour practices that seemingly lead to an improved sense of personal wellbeing. In this section, I will also show how these learning opportunities potentially equip the nostalgic viewer to address their desire for an improved sense of wellbeing and to access a lifestyle that engages in enriching labour practices. Furthermore, throughout my case study I will draw on Marx's (1986) descriptions of ideal labour and capitalist labour conditions in an effort to illustrate the disparity between the programme's constructed representation of labour and the contemporary urban viewer's likely experience of labour conditions. Marx's four types of alienation (1986) will also be useful in this discussion as I point out their absence and highlight what it means for the characters to be unburdened by feelings of alienation related to labour practices.

Knife-Making with Eivin

The first act establishes Eivin's enthusiasm for engaging in labour and shows the construction of a forge. Before he begins the labour process Eivin says, "I'm not super good at blacksmithing, but I take every opportunity I can to make something rather than buy it. You know, I kind of see it as learning a new skill". This immediately signals that the labour demonstrated onscreen should result in Eivin's satisfaction and establishes his attitude toward engaging in labour. Contributing to this sense of enthusiasm is the fact that Eivin will need to construct a forge before he starts making the knives. This task in itself is laboursome, however, Eivin is not despondent that he needs to do additional work. Furthermore, the viewer watches Eivin complete his entire labour process outdoors in the snow, which is not exactly pleasant and is a form of physical labour in itself. Interestingly, this form of labour is particularly different to the deskbound labour that characterizes the experiences of many urban dwellers. It is physical and strenuous, requiring Eivin to use his whole body. Every part of Eivin is engaged in this labour, whereas deskwork requires considerably less physical exertion and divides the body's employment. This contributes to the idea of wholeness that the Kilchers represent and reiterates the notion that late capitalist labour is marked by separation and fragmentation. The beginning of this narrative clearly establishes how different Eivin's labour is from the urban norm and emphasises his enjoyment of it. This fervour also indicates that Eivin does not

experience alienation from his 'species-being' as he is clearly enthused by his work and gains satisfaction from it. These factors serve as a framework for various film techniques to be applied that accentuate this idealistic representation of labour.

The editing pace and soundtrack of the scene play a critical role in representing labour as an invigorating and captivating activity. Combined with Eivin's verbal expressions of enjoying labour, these techniques ensure that his labour practices are portrayed as idyllic and significantly different to that of contemporary urban labour conditions. Through quick-paced cuts to the beat of an allegro tempo soundtrack, Eivin's enthusiasm is accentuated. After Eivin drills the first hole in the wok, a series of shots capture him engaging in laboursome actions: Drilling, cutting, breaking coal, sifting through scrap, and combining the parts to make the forge. These shots are rapidly cut and spliced, which creates the illusion of Eivin working fervently and implies his exuberance and devotion to the labour process. The quick cuts also stress the physicality and materiality of the process, making sure that the viewers see every action performed and object used; clearly marking how different this labour is to the predominantly clerical work of urban dwellers.

The second film technique applied that enhances the enthusiastic tone of the scene is the soundtrack. A guitar is strummed briskly with the addition of occasional musical embellishments to create a slight variation from the repetitive strum. Its quick pace creates a sense of rapid motion, which compliments the editing effect. Essentially, the soundtrack reinforces the illusion of Eivin working enthusiastically, and portrays labour as a captivating activity that elicits unwavering dedication to the process. Thus, the editing technique and soundscape for this scene magnifies the positive relationship between Eivin and his work and therefore indicates the absence of alienation between the worker and his work.

The third stylistic tendency is Eivin's zealous voice-over narration that accompanies a large part of the onscreen action and explains the process of labour demonstrated onscreen. Eivin speaks at a brisk tempo which matches the rapid progression of shots and the quick pace of the soundtrack. The narration supports everything Eivin demonstrates onscreen; thereby, supporting the choice he made to engage in labour and every step he performs thereafter. For example, as the viewer watches Eivin construct the forge, his voice-over narration simultaneously supports the onscreen actions:

Eivin's voice-over narration:



The forge is definitely improvised



but the general idea is that you need to be able to heat steel up to be red hot



and I just ended up using an old cast-iron wok, drilling some holes in it,

and making a way that I could blow air up through



the bottom of it and fill it full of coals

There you go! You've got a forge"



In this narration, the spoken word enriches the visual image as it provides extra information about the labour process. The onscreen action and dialogue would have sufficed in conveying how the forge was constructed, but the voice-over narration reinforces Eivin's enjoyment of labour. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the narration is applied to the scene during the post-production phase. This means that the material is deliberately applied to the scene on account of its compatibility with the programme's intended message. The editing style and soundtrack are also part of the post-production phase; however, it is the voice-over narration that is most obviously intended to reiterate the idealised portrayal of labour relations in this scene. Thus, these techniques build upon Eivin's verbal expression of favouring labour and reinforce the ideology that engaging in an entire labour process will result in an improved sense of wellbeing and contentment.

In Marx's theory on the second type of alienation he argues that by estranging the worker from being in control of the process of labour and by forcing the worker to only perform a small portion of the labour process, late capitalist labour conditions cause the worker to experience alienation from the work and its product (1986). This narrative, however, represents a scenario where Eivin is engaged in an entire labour process, and he has complete control over every aspect of the project, from choosing the pieces of scrap for the forge to finally fitting the knife handles. The first portion of this narrative calls attention to the absence of alienation in Eivin's experience of labour. The point of the narrative is for Eivin to make two knives; however, the entire first portion is focused on Eivin constructing a forge to be able to make the knives. The narrative need not represent Eivin constructing the forge for its purpose to be achieved, but by including this operation the programme shows how Eivin is invested in the entire labour process, from its conception, to constructing the apparatus needed to carry out the idea, and finally, to the making of the knives. In doing this, it is implied that Eivin's satisfaction is derived

from the whole labour process. Therefore, the programme presents a scenario where Marx's description of his theory of 'the division of labour' (1986) is not evident and the character is clearly not alienated from the labour process as he displays enthusiasm for the project even when his project is prolonged. The contemporary viewer experiencing late capitalist labour conditions is thus offered examples of ideal labour relations that are significantly different to their reality.

Finally, the idealised representation of labour relations in this act is facilitated by characteristics of the lifestyle television genre. Through a transformative element, this act of the narrative contributes to the overall representation of acquiring an improved sense of personal wellbeing. Eivin gathers an "old rusty wok", pieces of discarded metal and a vacuum cleaner. From these discarded items he designs and constructs something that is essential to achieving his goal of making his knives. Though it is a small transformation, transforming useless items into one useful item, it recalls in literal terms Marx's theory that through productive activity we can develop and fulfil ourselves (1986). The successful construction of the forge enables Eivin to proceed to making the knives. Thus, as is characteristic of the lifestyle genre, the transformation demonstrated in this act ultimately results in the improvement of Eivin's satisfaction and wellbeing and facilitates the portrayal of ideal labour relations.

Where the first act represents Eivin's positive relationship with labour and foregrounds his complete engagement with the entire labour process, the second act draws attention to the close relationship between the product of labour (the knives) and the worker (Eivin). This act therefore foregrounds the absence of Marx's first type of alienation (1986) as the knives are clearly represented as a personal expression of their maker, and on completion of the project, the product of labour belongs to Eivin. As in the first act, various film techniques are used to emphasise Eivin's enjoyment and engagement in his labour and the wholeness of the knife as a complete product. The use of voice-over narration, close-up shots and pronounced diegetic sound accentuates the relationship between Eivin and his product of labour and therefore facilitates the portrayal of idealised labour relations.

One segment in particular plays a significant role in illustrating how the knives are an expression of Eivin. This example also illustrates the absence of alienation in his experience of labour. As Eivin shapes the tip of a blade, his voice-over narration explains:

The design for my knives basically just came from banging on the metal, banging something out. I didn't really take the time to design something a whole lot first. It's just kind of what came to me as I went and what came out of the knife. You know, what came out of the piece of steel was those knives. One ended up being a kitchen knife and one became a hunting knife.

This excerpt is far more than a nonchalant explanation of how Eivin decided upon the design of his knives: It reveals that the knives are, in essence, an extension and expression of their maker. As Eivin says, "it's just kind of what came to me as I went and what came out of the knife ...". This excerpt illustrates Marx's theory that humans express themselves through creating objects, and as a result, the creator sees themselves in the product of labour (1986). For Eivin, the stimulating blacksmithing process inspires the design of the knives, and in a way, it seems that the knives are organically linked to him as something that 'came out' of him. The knives are therefore a direct expression of Eivin's creativity and from this process Eivin derives satisfaction and fulfilment. Thus, through Eivin's onscreen and off-screen speech, the viewer is clearly aware of the control that Eivin holds over his labour process and his creativity. Consequently, the viewer is shown how through having control over the labour process, the worker develops a close relationship to the product and can derive fulfilment and satisfaction from labour.

Moreover, Eivin's 'oneness' with his labour process and its product is reflected and emphasised in the use of close-up shots and pronounced diegetic sound in the scene. These elements create a visceral experience that clearly illustrates the relationship between Eivin and his product of labour. Through these film techniques the scene not only tells the viewer about the relationship between the worker and his product, but also shows their relationship using audio-visual means.

The scene begins with a low-angle shot of Eivin hammering a piece of steel resting on an anvil and the shrill clanging of steel-on-steel dominates the soundscape. This shot immediately establishes the scene's focus on Eivin and his product of labour; the low angle of the shot means that the anvil is closest to the camera and Eivin is placed in the middle ground. Connecting the two is the focal point of the shot: Eivin's arm wielding the hammer down upon the steel. It is the action of striking the hammer on the steel that creates the blades, therefore,

this action and its sound is what literally connects the worker to his product. Following this shot is a close-up of the forge with the fire licking up the sides of the wok. Sparks fly and crackle when Eivin thrusts the piece of steel into the red-hot coals, and the scene cuts to a slight high-angle close-up of the red-hot piece of iron lying on the anvil and a hammer beating it. For most of the scene the viewer is offered close-up images of the glowing fire, the red-hot iron and the hammer striking the iron. Eivin, or parts of Eivin, are in each of these shots: Moving the piece of iron in the fire, taking the iron out of the fire, wielding the hammer and sending it down upon the iron. Throughout the act we hear Eivin's hammer striking steel, peppering his explanations and voice-over narration with a clanging sound. This scene is visceral and takes the viewer into the labour process by showing exactly how close Eivin really is to his product of labour. Thus, the film techniques of the scene accentuate the undeniable relationship that the worker has with his product and reflects Marx's theory that under ideal labour conditions the product of labour is an expression of the worker's creativity (1986).

The absence of alienation is further exemplified halfway through the scene as Eivin shares his thoughts with the viewer on the art of blacksmithing by verbalising his appreciation for the art and sharing his wish to better his skill. Through Eivin sharing his thoughts on blacksmithing and acknowledging those who have excelled in the art before him, the absence of Marx's third and fourth type of alienation is also evident. It is made clear that Eivin is not alienated from his 'species-being' or from other workers (1986), as he recognises his personal appreciation for the labour process and can identify with those who also engage in blacksmithing. With a cheerful smile, Eivin speaks to the camera, saying:

As I'm banging away on these pieces of metal, I can't help but think about all the people for thousands of years and all the crazy stuff they used to make with nothing more than a hammer and an anvil and some fire you know? Suits of armour! I mean that is like so far beyond me—and decorative knives and swords! And the Japanese used to make these Samurai swords that were absolute masterpieces and you know, here I am just hammering away making some kind of piece-of-crap knife. But to me it's great, you know, and maybe someday I'll be able to make that sword or a suit of armour and that would be awesome.

This part of the narrative appears to be merely a nostalgic reflection of Eivin's thoughts, but I would like to suggest that he is in effect showing that he is not alienated from his species-being nor his fellow workers. Eivin's mindfulness of others who have achieved far greater creations through the art of blacksmithing and his wish to better his own skill is indicative of the satisfaction he derives from the labour process and therefore shows that he does not experience any of the four types of alienation presented by Marx (1986).

The third and final act shows Eivin finishing his knives by refining their shape, quenching them in oil and fitting the handles. While the project is in its final stages, Eivin offers some concluding remarks that validate the project and emphasise the importance of what he has created. Probably the most significant speech concerning the representation of labour in this narrative is found here. Eivin expresses his opinion on the labour process and says:

Knives are probably one of the most important tools that I will always take with me no matter where I go. Being able to make my own just makes it that much cooler to carry that knife. It's something that I just really appreciate. You know, the time and the energy that went into it and the learning process—I'm not an expert but I'm learning as I go and it's fun.

In this excerpt Eivin echoes and substantiates Marx's theory on the division of labour by appreciating that he was in control of the creation of his knives and that he is able to use and carry the knife that he put his time and energy into making. Eivin also draws attention to the learning process that he went through in the making of the knives which substantiates Marx's theory that man needs to create and be a part of the whole labour process so that the worker develops and improves various skills (1986).

In Marx's formulation, equal weight is placed on the four different aspects of the labour experience for the worker (1986). However, contemporary lifestyle television programmes, Charlotte Brunsdon argues, tend to emphasise the result of the transformative process, thereby diminishing importance of the process leading up to the result (2003, p. 10). In *Alaska: The Last Frontier* this is not the case: Each step of the labour process is represented in the narrative with film techniques accentuating Eivin's labour and a voice-over narration offering the viewer Eivin's thoughts on his labour process, serving as an extra source of information for the viewer. When Eivin finally finishes the knives, the time spent on revealing the complete

product is considerably shorter than the time spent watching him create the knives. Eivin announces the completion of the knives as he looks down on his creation, and this is followed by a fairly short shot of the two knives lying side-by-side. Eivin does not demonstrate the use of the knives nor does he show significant jubilation for their completion.

Furthermore, there are no film techniques used to emphasise the result of labour; the soundtrack does not crescendo into celebratory notes and the camera does not linger on the knives. The scene ends with a shot of the knives and Eivin narrates, “You know, I want to keep those traditions alive because it’s an amazing skill”. Thus, even as the camera reveals the two knives, Eivin’s narration draws attention away from the product and focuses it on the labour process of blacksmithing and developing this skill.

Through emphasising the labour process and diminishing the focus on the result of the labour, this narrative, and most other narratives in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, presents a text that represents labour differently from most contemporary lifestyle television programmes. Where most contemporary lifestyle programmes reflect the ideology of capitalist society by placing the focus on the result or the commodity, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects Marx’s idea that engaging in the entire process of labour is critical to the quest for personal wellbeing (1986). The process of labour is celebrated in this narrative and throughout the programme as it displays the satisfaction that the characters derive from labour. Thus, every facet of the narrative represents ideal labour relations that are significantly different from most late capitalist labour relations.

Preserving Salmon: *Alaska: The Last Frontier*’s Didactic Elements

So far I have focused this case study on how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* constructs a fantasy of wholeness by representing a set of idealised labour relations that are quite different from those generally experienced in the present late capitalist age. I have also established that certain characteristics of the lifestyle television genre facilitate the projection of this fantasy of wholeness and its potential evocation of nostalgia. However, I would like to shift my focus toward examining how the didactic tone of the programme facilitates an opportunity for the viewer to ‘learn’ how to engage in labour practices that lead to a sense of personal wellbeing and address feelings of nostalgia.

In the case of *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, its didactic element facilitates both the evocation of nostalgia and the information that may potentially lead to an improved sense of contentment. To illustrate this point, I turn to a narrative in Episode 9 of Season 4 (*Secrets of the Range Rider*) that provides an instructive example of the didactic address found in most narratives in the programme. By using examples from this episode, I will show how viewers are offered a space to 'learn' how to achieve a sense of fulfilment that potentially equips the nostalgic viewer to imagine or vicariously enjoy the idea of transforming from a nostalgic state to a state of contentment.

As I examine the strong didactics element in the programme, it is important to bear in mind that the programme does not present itself as an instructional text on how to live in Alaska or how to live self-sufficiently. Rather, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* blends an entertaining narrative of personal stories with a strong instructional tone. These informative elements are incorporated in the narrative and are always within the context of personal stories. In this narrative's case, Eve and Charlotte need to preserve pieces of salmon that have not yet been eaten by the family. Given this context, the camera follows Eve and Charlotte's process of preserving the salmon and 'incidentally' the viewer is offered a step-by-step demonstration and narration of the process, from beginning to completion.

First, I would like to identify the strictly linear structure of the narrative as a didactic element used to support the notion that engaging in an entire labour process brings satisfaction to the worker. The narrative is presented in a linear timeline, which enables the labour process to be presented as clearly as possible. This also means that the various steps to preserving the salmon are demonstrated in their correct order, which provides the viewer with a narrative that is straightforward and easily understandable. In most contemporary lifestyle television programmes centred on the construction of food, furniture, or gardens, an example of what will be made or achieved in the episode is shown at the beginning. This focuses attention on the result of labour and diminishes the importance of the actual labour process. In this narrative, however, Eve and Charlotte do not present a previously preserved jar of salmon or a synopsis of what is to come in the narrative. The viewer is guided through the labour process step-by-step and witnesses the gradual transformation of the freezer-burned pieces of salmon into smoked and oiled jars of preserved salmon. The only information provided at the

beginning of the narrative is that it is important for the Kilcher family to be resourceful and use all they have. This activity contributes to the Kilchers' self-sufficient lifestyle, which has been established as bringing satisfaction to every character. Thus, the viewer is informed of the importance of the task and that ultimately it will facilitate the continuation of their fulfilling lifestyle.

Having a strict linear structure means that the narrative does not celebrate the product of labour before the labour process is completed. The linear structure also ensures that the narrative portrays the various stages of the labour process in proportion to how much time and energy is spent on each step; the onscreen time given to the preserving process outweighs the time given to showing Eve stacking the jars of salmon in the cellar. Indeed, the narrative is not overtly didactic; however, through its linearity it provides a framework for other didactic elements to be effective and establishes the importance of engaging in an entire labour process to gain satisfaction.

Secondly, the most obvious didactic elements used in this narrative (and in most other narratives in the programme) are the characters' explanations and demonstrations of the labour process to the audience. The narrative is made up of Eve and Charlotte's actions in preserving the salmon, their speech to the camera, and their voice-over narrations. These three aspects work together to present an informative address.

For example, the narrative begins with Eve and Charlotte placing fillets of salmon on metal racks into a smoking cupboard outside. These actions demonstrate how they go about beginning the preserving process and accompanying these actions is Eve and Charlotte's voice-over narration and onscreen interviews that inform the viewer of what they are doing and why.

Eve's voice-over narration and onscreen interview:

It's really important to all of us that we try to be resourceful and use all that we have. So, I went around and got everyone's old fish from last year that was freezer burned and not so good anymore, and just did a quick brine with the fish—just salt and sugar.

Charlotte's voice-over narration and onscreen interview:

Salting is one step toward preserving it, and then when you subject it to a little bit of smoke, that's another step in curing it for the winter.

Thus, the viewer is informed of exactly what Eve and Charlotte have already done to the fish, what they are doing onscreen and why they needed to brine the fillets and then smoke them. The actions performed by the characters therefore 'teach' the viewer how to go about preparing salmon for preserving, how to arrange the fillets for the smoking process and what a smoking cupboard may look like. The onscreen interviews and narration, on the other hand, explains why the characters are going about their onscreen actions.

Following this, Charlotte and Eve strip the bark off of alder wood logs. While doing this, both characters talk to each other:

Charlotte to Eve:

Alright, so we should probably peel the last of that Alder. You know we can smoke with other kinds of wood, but alder does really leave a nice flavour.

Eve to Charlotte:

Yeh! It's super important to strip this bark because man! does it ever make it bitter and not so good-tasting if you don't.

Here, Eve and Charlotte provide explanations for their actions as they demonstrate stripping the bark. Accentuating the didactic tone is the fact that these explanations would not necessarily be needed between the two characters if they did not intend for the viewer to understand their actions. Both characters are sure of their actions and do not need instruction from each other. This means that the didactic tone is intended for the viewer to hear and its design is to teach the viewer about the onscreen labour process. These elements also furnish the viewer with enriching information about their choice of wood and that bark gives a bitter taste to smoked food. The narration and the speech to the camera support one another and build a strong didactic address that is offered to the viewer as an opportunity to learn about preserving salmon and engaging in the entire labour process.

According to Annette Hill, this combination of demonstration and explanation means that "audiences are more open in their acknowledgement of learning from reality programming" (2005, p. 100). This indicates that the didactic address does not function on a subliminal level. The viewer can recognise the didactic address and therefore consciously makes the choice whether or not to assimilate the information offered. On one level, the viewer makes the

choice whether or not to engage in learning how to preserve salmon; on another level, the viewer chooses whether or not to learn how to engage in labour practices that are significantly different from late capitalist practices but seem to be fulfilling and satisfying for the labourer. Then, for the nostalgic viewer, an additional three choices are presented: To remain in a state of nostalgia and not assimilate the information offered by the programme; to engage in restorative nostalgia and attempt to emulate the practices (or similar) portrayed onscreen; or to engage in reflective nostalgia and consider the lessons taught through the programme and apply changes to their reality in order to gain an improved sense of personal wellbeing. Admittedly, these responses to the text may not materialise as simply as they have been described. The text may merely provide an opportunity to imagine or vicariously enjoy the idea of transforming from a nostalgic state to a state of contentment rather than literally transforming. However, at the heart of the various responses remains the inclination to address the desire for an improved sense of wellbeing and to access a lifestyle that engages in enriching labour practices.

In the discussion of the third didactic aspect of the programme, it is important that I reiterate that although *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents a strong didactic address, its trajectory is not to provide an overtly instructional guide. The programme blends an entertaining narrative of personal stories with a strong, yet unobtrusive, didactic tone. This blend is achieved by the way in which the information is delivered to the viewers. Characters never directly address the viewer or refer to 'the people watching at home'. The information is imparted through the characters casually sharing their labour processes with the camera operator. I specifically refer to the camera operator and not the camera, because the characters seldom look directly at the camera when speaking. Rather, it seems as if the characters are explaining their activities to a person off-screen and the fact that the activities are being recorded is incidental. For the viewer, a sense of familiarity and friendship is cultivated through this didactic style: It is as if the viewer has requested a close friend to share their knowledge.

In this scene the sense of familiarity is accentuated by the fact that Charlotte and Eve are working together; one is not teaching the other. This means that when they offer instruction or information, they are presumably addressing the viewer. This interaction between the characters and the viewer could be described as personal, or even intimate. They take

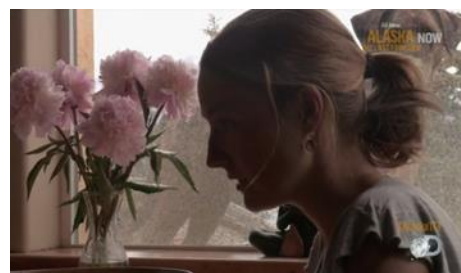
information that they have gathered through time and effort, information that belongs to them and share it with the viewer. In a sense, Eve and Charlotte include the viewer as a third-party and share the information they possess with the viewer. Later in the episode, after the salmon has been cured, Eve and Charlotte sit opposite each other at a square table indoors and put the salmon into glass jars. The camera is positioned as a third person sitting at the table, as if the viewer was also placing the salmon into jars. Eve tells Charlotte how many jars they will end up having after the process and while she speaks the scene cuts between close-up and medium shots of Eve speaking and Charlotte reacting to Eve with nods.

“So we have about 23 fillets and ...



... once we strip ‘em, ...

... put ‘em in the jars, dabble a bit of oil in there, ...



... in the end ...

... we'll probably have about 40 small jars
and 20 larger jars."



The viewer is 'part' of the conversation and follows the conversation by looking at Eve and noting Charlotte's reaction to what Eve says as if the viewer was actually sitting at the table. This cultivates a sense of familiarity and friendliness in the narrative as the viewer is invited close to the characters and to their work. At the same time, the viewer is also offered information that belongs to the characters and has been tried and tested. This information enriches the narrative and may enhance or encourage the learning experience. In a sense, this didactic element provides a space for the viewer to connect with their 'species-being'.

The fourth and final didactic element is the least obvious of the elements evident in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. This element is called 'incidental learning'. It is generally unplanned learning that results from other activities. Through participating in a planned activity, the viewer incidentally learns additional lessons. In *Alaska: The Last Frontier* this didactic element can be identified through examining the environment in which the characters engage in labour and the values they display by following this particular labour process. For example, Charlotte and Eve perform part of their labour process outside using a relatively rustic-looking smoking cupboard and the latter part of the process is performed indoors using simple utensils to can the salmon.

For the urban viewer who experiences capitalist working conditions, Charlotte and Eve's working environment is significantly different to theirs. Where walls, windows, desks and other technology surround the urban worker, trees, mountains, snow and fields surround Eve and Charlotte when they are outside. Where the urban viewer easily buys canned food in a grocery store and perhaps throws away food that is nearly past its sell-by date, Eve and Charlotte use rudimentary equipment to can the salmon so that it does not go to waste. Thus, the viewer participates in watching Eve and Charlotte preserve their salmon, and incidentally learn that the characters work in a rural environment, that canning food is not only accomplished in a factory, and that preserving food is an important aspect of living self-sufficiently; all of which

are in opposition to the values held in a late capitalist environment. At this juncture I recall my discussion in Chapter 1 about the prominent belief in urban dwellers that rural lifestyles and the American wilderness offers the individual a more idyllic existence than urban environments do. Considering this discussion, there is a strong likelihood that the viewer will assume that the wilderness setting Charlotte and Eve work in and the values they uphold enhances the satisfaction they derive from their labour. Thus, Charlotte and Eve's working environment and the values they display hold the potential to facilitate incidental learning, enhancing the viewer's learning experience.

I have discussed two narratives from *Alaska: The Last Frontier* to illustrate how the programme constructs a fantasy of wholeness through representing scenarios that are opposite to the fragmented labour experience of late capitalism. By using Marx's theories on capitalist labour conditions as a guide (1986), I have shown how the programme represents ideal labour practices and subsequently an absence of 'estranged labour'. I have identified that certain film techniques emphasise characters' fervour for engaging in labour and highlight the physical and emotional connections that characters share with their products of labour. I have also illustrated how characteristics of the lifestyle television genre facilitate the representation of a fantasy of wholeness. Through presenting transformations that result in the characters' improved sense of personal wellbeing, the programme potentially evokes nostalgia.

Furthermore, with specific attention to the didactic elements of the programme, I have shown that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* not only evokes nostalgia but also offers a space for the viewer to assimilate information that potentially leads to an improved sense of contentment. By examining the 'Preserving Salmon' narrative, four didactic elements were identified that was used to inform the viewer how to engage in enriching labour practices. The narrative's linear structure, character explanations and demonstrations, opportunities for incidental learning, and an overall sense of familiarity between the characters and the viewer make for a strong didactic address. These elements seem to create a space for 'learning' how to achieve a sense of fulfilment or assist the viewer in imagining their transformation from a nostalgic state to a state of wholeness. I have shown how these representations of wholeness and the idea of attaining an improved sense of wellbeing is a response to the experience of late capitalist labour values and practices. I have demonstrated how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* presents a

reactionary text that uses ideas of pre-capitalist labour practices as a means to evoke nostalgia for a bygone era that was based on conservative values.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This thesis was inspired by the observation that the representations of rural lives reminiscent of America's pre-industrial era presented by *Alaska: The Last Frontier* potentially evokes nostalgia for a time and space that does not require the practices and values of the present late capitalist urban reality. The onscreen images of a self-sufficient lifestyle based in the sublime and primitive Alaskan wilderness, a unified family and community, and fulfilling labour relations present an almost anachronistic and idealised vision of life that stands in stark contrast to America's contemporary late capitalist context that is marked by urbanisation, feelings of alienation, and an estrangement from labour. *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, I have argued, responds to the experiences of America's contemporary late capitalist urban context by representing idealised images of the Alaskan wilderness, family relations, community relations and labour practices. While shot in the present day and featuring contemporary people, the programme evokes nostalgia for 'simpler times' and a return to the past. I have shown that this idealisation of the past relates to reactionary ideologies that uphold white American identity and support the continuation of white Americans claiming a sense of ownership and indigeneity in America. Consequently, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* side-lines forms of social progress in contemporary society that have been brought about through movements such as feminism, civil rights and multiculturalism.

I have focused this study specifically on nostalgia as a form of televisual engagement. It is through considering the role of nostalgia in reality television's representation of rural lives that I have revealed that television's recent fascination with representing rural lives and idealised visions of frontier life is symptomatic of a dissatisfaction with the experience of late capitalist urban practices and values that have drastically deteriorated family, community and labour relations since the onset of the American industrial revolution. This provides a clear indication that television theory needs to explore the contradictory ways in which television addresses the late capitalist condition. It has been my argument in this thesis that nostalgia is a particularly important mode through which television texts negotiate the conditions of late capitalist experience.

I have used Svetlana Boym's (2001) theories on nostalgia to show that the condition of nostalgia is far more complex than the popular understanding of it as a mere state of sentimentality for the past. Exploring these two modes of nostalgia has allowed me to explain the various manifestations of nostalgia in *Alaska: The Last Frontier* and how these manifestations allow different approaches to satisfy a yearning for the (imagined) past. A prominent facet of my work has been my discussion on how restorative nostalgia is manifested in the programme; representing and embodying America's frontier myth and thus exemplifying the narrative on which America's national identity is built. The ideologies that form the basis of the programme, therefore, are extremely idealised and selective and do not account for the complexities of land ownership, racial genocide, gendered inequality, and the case of many deaths from starvation and disease in early American history. I have shown that these idealised representations play on a nostalgic sensibility for understanding the meaning of America. I have also argued that this manifestation of restorative nostalgia responds to the uncertainty of contemporary American identity by recalling the well-rehearsed, familiar, and traditional understanding of the American settler history, which restores a relationship between the past and present.

Furthermore, I have shown that restorative nostalgia is also manifest in the characters' performances as they continuously explain that their current practices emulate the practices of their pioneering forefathers. These practices are also unfailingly described as more satisfying than the practices of more civilized American society. I have argued that these restoratively nostalgic representations of the past offer an idealised vision of rural living that critiques contemporary society through juxtaposition. Although the images of rural living are extremely idealised, and thus distorted, this juxtaposition allows for the comparative nature of restorative nostalgia to mediate an understanding of how the nostalgic viewer's reality could be different and that this type of lifestyle is (seemingly) attainable as the restoratively nostalgic characters successfully maintain this connection to the past. Therefore, the manifestation of restorative nostalgia responds to practices marked by late capitalist customs, by presenting 'ordinary people' who demonstrate lifestyle practices that seem more desirable. These alternative practices seem attainable for the nostalgic individual and appeal to the restoratively nostalgic sentiment of re-establishing a relationship with the past.

Additionally, I have argued that reflective nostalgia is also cultivated through the representations of rural lives. These nostalgic evocations of frontier living offers the viewer demonstrations of an alternative space that conjure a previous time. These evocations provide a way for the viewer to access memories or imagined memories and create a space for reflection and evaluation. Certain editing techniques facilitate the space created for reflection by creating scenes that linger on frontier life and emphasise their radical difference from lifestyles and environments marked by industrialisation and urbanity. I have argued that these visions of an ultimately satisfying and enriching lifestyles allow for a comparative engagement with the text as the televisual medium offers an opportunity to evaluate the benefits of rural living against the experience of late capitalist urban life. This manifestation of reflective nostalgia responds to contemporary American society by representing idealised visions of rural living that play on a nostalgic sensibility to consider the benefits of alternative times and spaces and subsequently appropriate or reimagine these aspects within a contemporary context.

Synthesising the work of television theorists such as Annette Hill (2005) and Charlotte Brunsdon (2003), I have argued that by featuring a didactic address and narratives of transformation, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* not only evokes nostalgia, but also creates a space for the viewer to 'learn' how to access the sense of fulfilment and wellbeing portrayed by the characters. The work presented in this thesis show that these learning experiences offer a demonstration of more conservative values that promote reactionary sentiments responding to the more progressive values of contemporary American urban society. The programme potentially teaches the viewer how to live according to values and practices of a lifestyle that is associated with the foundations of conservatism and portrays this style of 'restorative' living to be thoroughly satisfying. These demonstrations seem to celebrate conservative values and practices and position the more progressive mores of contemporary urban society as detrimental to the individual. All five chapters evidence how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers extremely idealised and selective political ideologies that appeal to a mythologized version of America's pre-industrial era. I have suggested that these images respond to a dissatisfaction with late capitalist life, and more specifically, the effects on family and community structures, labour relations, and nature's rehabilitative qualities.

In Chapter 2 I have explored America's frontier myth and discussed how *Alaska: The Last Frontier* reflects this mythology, along with the regressive ideologies on which it is constructed. Like the frontier narrative, I argue that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* overtly celebrates the sublimity and primitivism of the American wilderness and living rurally, which consequently plays on a nostalgic sensibility for 'simpler times' and a return to the past. I show that these nostalgic evocations kindle a yearning to reconnect to the 'original' meaning of America. However, I have also strongly reiterated the selective nature of nostalgia and the frontier narrative, paying specific attention to the erasure of the American Indian narrative. This erasure depicts the white settler as the embodiment of what America was and should be. In essence, this vision aligns with dominant interests and contrasts contemporary societal efforts to recognise the existence of cultural diversity and other structures that diverge from conservative thought such as single-parent families, homosexual couples, or interracial relationships etc. Once again, I show that reactionary sentiments are encoded within the text by reflecting a retrogressive vision of America's past values and social structure, and furthermore, by depicting this distorted image as ultimately satisfying.

The third chapter addresses how the programme appeals to a nostalgic sensibility for family and community structures that are reminiscent of American culture before the onset of industrialisation and urbanisation. I substantiate this argument by exploring the condition of anomie, which is a symptom of urban environments, and I make the point that although America has traditionally held family and community in high regard, the contemporary experience of these structures does not match the traditional idealised vision of American family life. This idealised vision of the nuclear family, however, is also part of America's myth-making and is thus tremendously exclusionary. Whereas contemporary reflections of the family have started to recognise homosexual couples, interracial relationships, fostering, adoption, divorce, single-parent families, or child headed families, the traditional idealised vision of the American family does not. I argue that *Alaska: The Last Frontier* offers images that distinctly portray a traditional and idealised sense of kinship and community, which in urban environments may be perceived to be lost. I read these idealised images as a response to late capitalist urban life and argue that these nostalgic evocations reconnect the nostalgic person to ideas of the past. They imply that present-day family and community structures should

emulate the romanticised visions that are depicted onscreen, which plays on a nostalgic sentiment for regaining the same sense of fulfilment and satisfaction that America's past seems to have held.

The portrayal of ideal labour relations that I discuss in the fourth chapter foregrounds the selectivity of the American narrative and the comparative function of nostalgia, representing pre-industrial labour practices as ultimately fulfilling in comparison to the prevalent experience of estrangement, dissatisfaction, and alienation has been associated with late capitalist labour conditions. By focusing on how the viewer is guided through the entire labour processes, I have shown that characteristics of reality television facilitate a fantasy of wholeness or a vision of ultimate fulfilment that is inextricably owed to reconnecting with past ideals. Thus, I show how reality television and nostalgia work hand in hand to evoke nostalgia for visions of the past and practices of a bygone era. Such a nostalgic reflection offers an implicit commentary on the dissatisfactions of contemporary labour conditions. I argue that although the lifestyle represented by *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is radical and requires land ownership and other costly assets, it offers what seems like a way out of the late capitalist system of labour and exchange. The programme's didactic address and narratives of transformation offers instructional information that gives the impression of educating the viewer on how to achieve the same lifestyle and labour relations as the Kilcher family. On the other hand, I argue that for the individual who cannot, or does not want to, relinquish the mores of late capitalism, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* is potentially a form of escapism. The programme provides visions of an alternative reality and offers a space for the nostalgic individual to temporarily engage with representations of life that are radically different from the reality of a late capitalist urban context.

In these chapters not only do I identify certain aspects of contemporary everyday urban life that have drastically changed since the onset of America's industrial revolution, but I also show how these changes have produced effects such as anomie and estranged labour. It is in relation to these conditions that nostalgia potentially resonates with the viewing public. In essence, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* foregrounds a significant sense of change and loss by recalling visions of a mythologized frontier life. These visions not only evoke nostalgia for a time that did not entail anomie and estranged labour, but also offers information that allows the nostalgic

viewer to consider the disparity between the past and present and potentially engage in reflective or restorative modes of dealing with this longing for an alternative time and space. Ultimately, *Alaska: The Last Frontier* conveys the message that extremely rural ways of life that place emphasis on nature, self-reliance and 'traditional' approaches to labour and lifestyle should be celebrated and regarded as far more satisfying than the dominant values and practices of contemporary late capitalist urban environments. In essence, this message opposes many of the ideologies on which the current capitalist system is based, and potentially calls for a re-evaluation of the effects that urban environments and late capitalist values have on the individual. However, it must be kept in mind that these representations of the past are not necessarily progressive. Rather, they support a reactionary response to contemporary urban life by presenting a selective and distorted evocation of America's past. This means that the idea of attaining a far more satisfying lifestyle through a return to 'the good old days' is a fantasy more than a viable reality.

I have tried to maintain a pluralistic understanding of the many ways in which nostalgia manifests in *Alaska: The Last Frontier*. However, the condition of nostalgia belongs to and has been addressed by many disciplines, including philosophy, literature, art, psychology, film, and sociology, therefore, to address the full extent of research on nostalgia is beyond the scope of this project. In this thesis I have explored how the text itself appeals to a nostalgic sensibility. However, nostalgia is experienced differently by each person. Conducting an ethnographic study of viewers' engagements with this programme was beyond the scope of this project, but I believe that an ethnographic study of actual viewing experiences would be a fruitful avenue for future research. I have only addressed one television programme that focuses on rural lives, but there are many other programmes, American and from other national contexts, that play on a nostalgic sensibility for reconnecting with more 'traditional' lifestyle practices. This might prove another worthwhile space to develop the ideas I have introduced here.

This dissertation has demonstrated the complex and integral role that nostalgia plays in *Alaska: The Last Frontier's* representation of rural lives. This televisual text not only evokes nostalgia for 'simpler times' and a return to the past, but also highlights a contemporary interest in recognising the significance of the past and how the change of environments, lifestyle practices, and values have affected the individual's experience of life. Although many of *Alaska:*

The Last Frontier's representations of an alternative lifestyle are distinctly idealised, there remains a convincing case underlining the dissatisfaction with late capitalist mores and a certain longing to engage with an idealised, rural and pre-industrial vision of American life.

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